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ERROR ANALYSIS OF  
TENSE AND ASPECT  
IN THE WRITTEN ENGLISH  
OF TURKISH STUDENTS

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ERROR ANALYSIS OF TENSE AND ASPECT  
IN THE WRITTEN ENGLISH OF TURKISH STUDENTS

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND LETTERS  
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BY  
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## ABSTRACT

Title: Error Analysis of tense and aspect in the written English of Turkish students  
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This study sought to identify the most common tense and aspect errors in the written English of native Turkish-speaking, first-year undergraduate learners of English as a foreign language. The study was based on error analysis to form a basis for teachers, syllabus designers, textbook writers, and researchers.

The data used in this study were elicited from the written discourse of one hundred volunteers from different faculties at Cumhuriyet University in Sivas. The written discourse was elicited by asking students to write a short autobiographical essay. Verb strings were identified and categorized as types of syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors.

Syntactic errors were identified applying the surface structure formula given below to the each verb string in the data:

Tense + ( Modal ) + ( have + -en ) + ( be + -ing ) + Main verb

Semantic/pragmatic errors were identified by referring to the larger context and inferring the intended meaning.

The results of the study showed that semantic/pragmatic errors were more common than syntactic errors in the written English of Turkish students. Out of 316 errors, 61.39% were semantic/pragmatic errors and 38.60% were syntactic errors.

Semantic/pragmatic errors were categorized into two types: 1) verb tense and aspect errors and 2) lexical errors. The majority of semantic/pragmatic errors (71.64%) were verb tense and aspect errors, and 28.35% were lexical errors. Verb tense and aspect errors fell into four categories: use of present tense instead of past tense (30.93%); use of present progressive aspect instead of simple present (24.46%); use of present perfect aspect instead of simple past (23.02%); and use of past tense instead of present tense (21.58%).

Syntactic errors were categorized into four types: misuse of the progressive aspect; lack of subject-verb agreement; omission of the verb;

and misordered verb string. Among the syntactic error categories, misuse of the progressive aspect (33.60%) was the largest group. Lack of subject-verb agreement constituted 30.32% of the syntactic errors, omission of the verb constituted 27.04%, and misordered verb string constituted 9.01%. Misuse of the progressive aspect was categorized into two types of errors: omission of the auxiliary 'be' (63.41%), and omission of the '-ing' morpheme (36.58%). The omission of verbs was also categorized into two types: omission of the copula (78.78%) and omission of other verbs (21.21%).

The findings of the study suggest that the meaning of tenses is more problematic than the form. Thus, the teaching of tense and aspect should be contextualized in meaningful discourse. Syntactic errors may be treated by focusing on oral and written drills.

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MA THESIS EXAMINATION RESULT FORM

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The examining committee appointed by the  
Institute of Economics and Social Sciences for the  
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Mehmet Kadir Şahin

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has read the thesis of the student.  
The committee has decided that the thesis  
of the student is satisfactory.

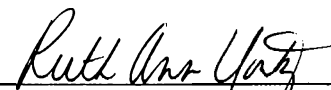
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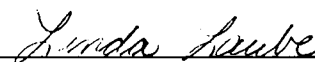
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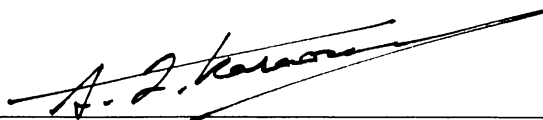
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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

## Background of the Problem

The students the researcher work with are between eighteen and twenty five years old and in their first year of study at university. Their language learning experiences are heterogeneous and differ from six to seven years. The students, who have had almost identical language learning background, have spent their entire experience learning English as a foreign language in an EFL classroom setting.

As an EFL teacher, the researcher devoted much of his time to tense and aspect errors made by the students both in their written and oral English. Although making errors is a natural phenomenon in language learning and an inevitable fact of the language learning process, the errors made in the English tense and aspect system during classtime have always called the researcher's attention to a certain point -- form and meaning of English tense and aspect system. To understand the difficulties that the learners have in using the English tense and aspect system, the researcher talked to his colleagues who teach English as a foreign language where the researcher teaches. The researcher noticed that the English tense and aspect system was taught deductively. The teachers first introduce the form of the English tense and aspect system then ask the learners to apply the learned forms in written or oral discourse. Later, question and answer drills are being performed to have the learners enable to use the taught forms. And then, related reading passages or exercises in the textbooks are followed to give more chance to the learners to use the learned forms. That is, the forms and meanings of a tense or an aspect are generally being taught at sentence level and different discourse meanings of the English tense and aspect system are sometimes neglected. To that end the researcher tried to find an answer to the question: What are the learners' perceptions about the form and meaning of English tense and aspect system?.

This idea has directed the researcher to focus on the learners' errors. Later, the researcher realized that since tense systems are language specific, the meanings and forms of tenses are complex and often difficult for non-native speakers to acquire. Since tense and aspect are

obligatory in English, a good grasp of form, meaning and discourse function of English tense and aspect system is needed to convey what one wants to say appropriately. Therefore, learners cannot avoid using tense and aspect in English.

To that end, the researcher decided to conduct research to identify the most common verb tense and aspect errors in the written English of first-year undergraduate Turkish speakers of English learners.

#### The Purpose of the Study

In the process of learning a second language the fact that students make errors has always been a cause of much concern to teachers and also text-book writers; therefore, there has always been an attempt to facilitate the process of target language learning by studying the phenomenon of 'errors' within a scientific framework which is consistent with both linguistic and learning theory.

Recently, cognitive and innovative instructional methodologies consider errors as windows to the language acquisition process. Errors made by the students are an inevitable and natural part of language learning and teaching process. In the light of these approaches, errors should not be a sign of alarm but should be a necessary tool for both teachers and students. Errors made by the learners and determined by the teachers may provide them needed information for the teaching and learning process and developing instructional priorities.

One means of developing instructional priorities is that teachers should be aware of their students' weaknesses. So the major step in order to get information about the most common errors made by the learners is the analysis of errors. In terms of encouraging foreign language teachers, the textbook writers, and curriculum designers, the researcher based this study on error analysis research that aims to provide evidence of which kinds of errors native Turkish speakers of first-year undergraduate English learners make in the process of mastering the English tense and aspect system.

Thus, the main purpose here is to help teachers and students because the errors determined by the teacher and made by the learners can be major elements in the feedback system of the language and learning process. It is very important for the teacher to see errors and their linguistic

descriptions to understand the learners' perception of English tense and aspect system.

To that end, the objectives of this study are;

a. To analyze EFL Turkish students' verb-tense errors and identify the most common ones.

b. To give information about the most common verb-tense errors made by learners of English as a foreign language to teachers, textbook writers, and syllabus designers.

#### Problem Statement

Grammatical structures are systematically related to meanings, uses and situations. Since the systematicity is language specific, to use a language properly, learners of a language must know the grammatical structures of that language and their meanings. They also have to know what forms of language are appropriate for given situations. So, the nature of the tense-aspect system of English is important because random changes in English tense-aspect system are not permissible, and if made, produce an ungrammatical and confusing piece of discourse.

Richards (1981) stated that every sentence in English must have both tense and aspect. It must be in either the past or the non-past, the present or the non-present; it must have either progressive, non-progressive, perfect or the non-perfect aspect.

Tense refers to a set of grammatical markings which are used to relate the time of the events described in a sentence to the time of the utterance itself. There are two tenses in English: present and past. Present tense associates the time of the event to the present moment in time. Past tense associates the time of the event with a time before the present moment. Tense is thus deictic; that is, it points either toward time now or time then (Richards, 1981).

As the tense system gives information about the time of the event, the aspect system gives information about the kind of event that the verb refers to. We may communicate through aspect such distinctions as whether an event is changing, repeated, habitual, or complete (Richards, 1981).

Since tense systems are language-specific, it is not surprising that verb-tense and aspect constitute one of the most problematic areas of

English for Turkish learners. Although the Turkish verb shows person, number, tense, aspect, voice, mood, and modality and students are prepared for these concepts to be expressed in English, the English forms cause great difficulty. For example, Turkish students may use the present progressive inappropriately with stative verbs, such as 'know' and 'see' for habitual actions:

\* I am knowing her.

\* I am seeing her everyday.

They generally confuse the past progressive and the 'used to' construction:

\* I was often going to the mountains when I was younger.

They often use present perfect tense as an alternative to the simple past tense.

\* I have gone to Istanbul last week.

Considering all these, we can ask the question: What are the most common syntactic and semantic/pragmatic verb tense and aspect errors in written discourse of first-year undergraduate native Turkish speakers of English as a foreign language learners?

#### Limitations and Delimitations

This study describes the most common verb tense errors made by the learners in their first year university education. The study does not attempt to explain the etiology of the errors.

This study has examined errors in written narrative discourse of Turkish EFL students. Only the verb strings were taken into consideration in the analysis of the errors.

The subjects of this study were in their first year of study at Cumhuriyet University in Sivas, Turkey, where students' only exposure to English is in the classroom setting.

#### Outline of the Thesis

This study has been composed of five main chapters: Chapter One Introduction, Chapter Two Literature Review, Chapter Three Methodology, Chapter Four Analysis of Data, and Chapter Five Conclusions. There is also an Appendices section at the end of the study.

In chapter one, background of the problem, purpose of the study, problem statement, limitations and delimitations of the study, and outline

of the thesis are presented.

In chapter two, related literature to the present study is reviewed. The functions of error analysis and errors made by the students and their contributions to teaching and learning process are discussed. Syntactic forms and semantic/pragmatic meanings of the tense and aspect system in English are discussed. The difficulties the learners have -- according to the results of the previous studies -- with the English tense and aspect system are presented.

In chapter three, the methodology used in the presented study is discussed. The participants of the study, data collection instrument, how the data were collected, and analysis of the data are presented in detail.

In chapter four, the results of the error analysis are presented. Each type of error and the number and percentage of the errors are shown in the tables. Syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors elicited from the data are discussed briefly. Some examples are given for each type of error made by the learners.

In chapter five, the study is summarized. Findings are presented and discussed one by one. The significance of the findings are also discussed by comparing them with the results of the previous studies. Chapter five also suggests some general pedagogical implications and directions for further research.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to give brief information about the error analysis movement, the theoretical and practical functions of error analysis, the role of students' errors in the language teaching and learning process, the form and meaning of the English tense and aspect system, how to use tense and aspect in English, and learners' difficulties with the English tense and aspect system.

### Historical Background and Functions of Error Analysis

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, behavioristic theory dominated the approach to language teaching. According to behavioristic theory, language is learned as a set of habits in which particular stimuli are associated with particular responses through reinforcement (Ellis, 1991). Language learning was viewed as habit formation and performance of habits. Larsen-Freeman (1986) presents the philosophy of this technique as follows: "The more often something is repeated, the stronger the habit and the greater the learning". The main idea of the theory is that "practice makes perfect".

Since learning to speak a foreign language is a matter of habit formation, from the point of view of behavioristic theory, learners will make errors when the new habits to be acquired differ from those already established (Chastain, 1980). Because learners use their past learned behavior in the attempt to produce new structural forms of the language they are learning and will transfer their automatic use of the mother tongue structure in attempting to produce the foreign language, it was believed that the errors the learners made were due to transfer of the learned habits from native language to foreign language (Rivers, 1982). Thus, contrastive analysis, the contrast and the comparison of the learner's two languages, was useful because it would predict the areas in the target language that would pose the most difficulty and would assist in the teaching and learning process.

In the late 1960s, under the influence of Chomsky's linguistic theories, the effect of transformational generative grammar and cognitive psychology influenced theories of second language learning (Rivers, 1982;



Stern, 1984). Chomsky (cited in Rivers, 1982) hypothesizes that human beings come into the world with an inborn language-learning capacity in the form of a language acquisition device that proceeds by hypothesis testing. Children do not learn by imitating. When born, they are exposed to language, they make hypotheses and formulate their own rules about language, and compare this with their innate knowledge of possible grammars based on the principles of universal grammar. In this way, one's competence or internalized grammar is built up and this competence makes language use or performance possible. In this view, language acquisition is internally rather than environmentally driven.

In light of changes in linguistics and psycholinguistic theory, cognitive theory developed. According to cognitive theory, language learning cannot be accounted for in terms of the memorization of a fixed set of habits (Ellis, 1991). The theory lays emphasis on the conscious acquisition of language as a meaningful system and it seeks a basis in cognitive psychology and in transformational grammar. Cognitive theory emphasizes control of the language in all its manifestations as a coherent and meaningful system which is a kind of consciously acquired 'competence' that the learner can put to use in real-life situations (Stern, 1984).

As the theories of second language learning and teaching changed, pedagogical methods that reflect the theories of linguistic and psychology have also changed (Chastain, 1980). The application of new theories of linguistics and psychology to language teaching has added a new dimension to the ways of viewing learner's errors (Corder, 1985). The cognitive approach, with its emphasis on hypothesis formation, experimentation, and feedback has come to consider errors essential to the learning process. The theory claims that errors are inevitable because they reflect various strategies in the language development of the learner. So there has been a shift to learning from errors rather than preventing errors.

Although some errors can be accounted for by interference from the native language, attentive teachers and researchers noticed that a great number of learners' errors cannot possibly be traced to their native languages. Dulay and Burt (as cited in Ellis, 1991) claim that only 3 per cent of the errors made by learners result from interference. In addition,

learners do not actually make all the errors that contrastive analysis predicts they should, and learners from disparate language backgrounds tend to make similar errors in learning one target language (Brown, 1987; Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 1991; Richards, 1973; James, 1986).

In the late sixties, scholars began to attempt to account for learners' errors which behavioristic theory and contrastive analysis could not predict. Advocates of error analysis proposed that the actual errors learners make can be observed, analyzed and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner (Brown, 1987; Ellis, 1991). The field of error analysis may be defined as dealing with the differences between the way non-native English speakers learning and the native speakers norm. Error analysis has become distinguished from contrastive analysis by its examination of errors attributable to all possible sources, not only those resulting from negative transfer of the native language. The possible sources might be intralingual errors within the target language, the sociolinguistic context of communication, psycholinguistic or context cognitive strategies, and no doubt countless affective variables. Error analysis has succeeded in elevating the status of errors from complete undesirability to the relatively special status of research object, curriculum guide, and indicator of learning strategy (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Hammerly, 1985).

Error analysis is a branch of applied linguistic activities and has theoretical and practical functions. The theoretical one is the part of the methodology for investigating the language learning process. It indicates to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the target language students have most difficulty producing correctly (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Jain, 1985; Richards, 1985). Errors may lead teachers to know a lot about the learning problems of individuals. Errors can reveal to teacher, course designer or textbook writer the knotty areas of language confronting the pupils (Sharma, 1981).

Corder (1981) points out the practical function of error analysis in guiding remedial action. Sharma (1981) supports Corder, saying that error analysis can provide strong support for remedial teaching and can be immensely helpful in setting up teaching priorities. Richards (1985) and

Jain (1985) state that error analysis continues to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching, and determines priorities for future effort. Hammerly (1985) states that error analysis enables teachers to revise teaching materials and procedures in order to improve their effectiveness.

Error analysis can be used in language teaching on an ongoing basis. It can help teachers knowing in what positions and with what frequencies learners make error. If the classroom teachers identify their students' errors by means of error analysis carefully, it enables them not only to understand the difficulties of their students but also to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching to provide the most suitable correction, and to offer remedial work as needed (Hammerly, 1985). Errors made by the learners and determined by the teacher are major elements in the feedback system of the teaching and learning process. Teachers can study the errors carefully in order to evaluate the student's evolving competence at a particular point in the course (Chastain, 1980). Error analysis must be regarded as an important key to a better understanding of the process underlying second language learning and might be seen as an appropriate classroom activity in which the results of analysis might direct the teachers' attention to learning problems of students and emphasis might be given to these predicted difficulties.

Corder (1981) emphasizes that error analysis is also important in the improvement of language teaching materials and methods, not only in remedial teaching but also in ordinary teaching. During the program itself, error analysis performed on a limited scale can reveal both the sources and the failures of the program. Teaching time and effort can be allocated accordingly for optimal results. The results of an error analysis might provide teachers with some clues about the effectiveness of their teaching materials.

#### Form and Meaning of the Tense and Aspect System in English

In English, the verb carries markers of grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, person, number, and mood and also refers to an action or state. Thus, the English verb string can be discussed in terms of its form and how it expresses real time distinction. Therefore, in this section,

first the meaning of tense and aspect in English will be presented and then the form of tense and aspect in English verb system will be introduced.

From the structuralist and transformationalist point of view English has two tenses -- past and present. In English, tense refers to the relationship between the form of verb and the time of the action or state it describes. In other words, tense relates the meaning of the verb to a time scale. By tense, we understand the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time -- past, present, and future.

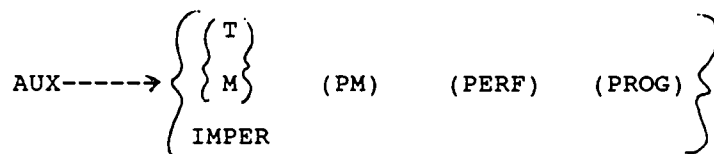
From the structuralist point of view, English has no grammatical future tense because in English finite verbs are not and have never been inflected to express future time in the way that they are in some other languages. There are several indirect ways of signaling future time in English. For example, one can use the modal auxiliary 'will', the quasi modal 'be going to', and future time expressions, such as 'tomorrow', 'next' year, and 'soon' to express future time in English (Celce-Murcia, 1984). These auxiliary verbs or adverbs of time are used in combination with the present tense to express future time since there is no inflected form of a verb that expresses future time in English.

Aspect is a grammatical category which deals with how the events described by a verb are viewed, such as whether the event is in progress, habitual, repeated, or momentary. Aspect concerns the manner in which a verbal action is experienced or regarded. Aspect may be indicated by prefixes, suffixes or other changes to the verb or by auxiliary verbs as in English (Leech & Svartvik, 1987; Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1983; Longman Linguistic Dictionary, 1985).

Given this point of view, in addition to the two tenses, there are two structural markers, which are progressive aspect and perfective aspect in English (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1983). The progressive aspect of the verb is a combination of some form of 'be' and the present participle form of the next verbal element in the verb string. On the other hand, the perfective aspect of the verb is a combination of the suitable form of 'have' with respect to the time and the past participle form of the next verbal element in the verb string (Burt & Kiparsky, 1978).

The form of tense and aspect in English verb system can be introduced

with the following phrase structure rule;



Here the auxiliary is AUX. It is made up of tense (T) or a modal (M) followed by the other optional auxiliary elements which are periphrastic modal (PM), the perfective (PERF), and progressive (PROG) aspect. (IMPER stands for imperative, which is a tenseless verb form in English.) (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1983).

The English verb, in phrase structure rules, has many potential auxiliary elements. When an English sentence is nonimperative, it necessarily takes grammatical tense or a modal. If an auxiliary verb other than a modal is present, it carries the tense. In a sentence, where there is no auxiliary verb, the main verb will carry the tense. In English, the four different optional auxiliary verbs those are a modal auxiliary (e.g., will, can, must, shall, may), a periphrastic modal (e.g., be going to, have to, be able to), the perfective aspect (HAVE plus the past participle form of the following verbal element), and the progressive aspect (BE plus the present participle form of the following verbal element) might be in present. In the auxiliary of a single English sentence, sometimes, there might be more than tense or a modal auxiliary. In such a situation, the perfective aspect precedes the progressive, the progressive and a periphrastic modal precedes either of the two aspects. A modal can precede a periphrastic modal and also either of the two aspects. If two or more tense-bearing auxiliary verbs are present, the first one will carry the tense (Azar, 1985; Binnick, 1991; Celce-Murcia, 1984; Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1983).

One system for explaining the structure of the English tense-aspect system is the Bull framework. The framework presented below has been developed for describing tense and aspect in Spanish by Bull (1960 as cited in Celce-Murcia, 1984), but it can be applied to any language. This framework posits four axes of orientation with respect to time: present, past, future and future in the past (i.e., hypothetical). Each axis has a neutral or basic form and two possible marked forms -- one signaling a time

'before' the basic time of that axis and the other signaling a time 'after' the basic time of that axis (Celce-Murcia, 1984; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983). For English the axes and the forms are as follows:

Table 1

Axis and the Forms of English Tense and Aspect

Axis of orientation	a time <u>before</u> the basic axis	basic axis time corresponding to the moment of reference	a time <u>after</u> the basic axis
Future time	He will have done it. (Future perfect)	He will do it. (Simple future)	No distinct form; rare usage
Present time	He has done it. (Present perfect)	He does it. (Simple present)	He is going to do it.
Past time	He had done it. (Past perfect)	He did it. (Simple past)	He was going to do it.
Future-in-the-past or hypothetical	He would have done it.	He would do it.	No distinct form; rare usage

—————> The form can also be used in another category that has no distinct form.

←———— The forms sometimes seem to switch back and forth with each other because of similarities in meaning and reference.

(Celce-Murcia, 1984; Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1983)

Learners' Difficulties with the English Tense-Aspect System

Celce-Murcia (1984) states that even in cases where the teacher or textbook writer understands and can verbally explain how the English tense and aspect system works, students still have problems. Since tense and aspect system of a language is unique and the association of time and concept differs among language communities, Hinkle (1992) states that the meaning and form of the tenses is complex and often difficult for nonnative speakers to acquire. A study of highly educated NNSs with near-native proficiency conducted by Copperties (1987, as cited in Hinkle, 1992) showed that whereas the subjects had obviously acquired tense forms, their

perception of tense meaning were not NS-like.

Following an analysis of the meaning and discourse function of the past tense, Riddle (1986) states that although the past tense appears to have a simple and readily explainable meaning, students, even very advanced ones, often fail in using this tense. She emphasizes that not only the speakers of language without past tense, such as Chinese or Indonesian, but also the Korean and Japanese speakers, whose languages do have a past tense, use the past tense incorrectly. Riddle proposes that advanced students have difficulty in using the past tense because they may not adequately understand its actual meaning and discourse function.

Hinkle (1992) studied 151 subjects' understanding of the subjects' perception about the meaning of English tenses in terms of time concepts used in ESL grammar texts. 130 participants out of 151 were ESL students from different countries whose TOFEL scores ranged from 500 to 617 and ESL training ranged from 4 to 18 years. 21 of the subjects -- 19 of them were graduate students and 2 of them were ESL teachers -- were NESs and included in the study as controls. The results of this study show that the perception of the NNSs of the present progressive and the simple past were close to those of NSs. These two tenses were followed by the past perfect tense, the past progressive tense, the simple present tense, the present perfect progressive, the past perfect progressive, and the present perfect tense, respectively. With the exception of two groups of the subjects, the values for the other present tenses reflect the considerable difficulty most NNSs had.

Bland (1988) states that the English present progressive offers an interesting challenge to ESL teachers and students. Although preliminary knowledge of the progressive is acquired early, the progressive often remains a problem for even the most advanced ESL learner. Richards (1981) supports Bland saying that the progressive may seem to be a relatively trivial part of English grammar, yet the semantic distinction which it presents in one with far-reaching effects.

Aycan (1990) conducted a study in which 56 native-Turkish speakers were used as subjects; semantic meanings of simple past, present perfect, and past perfect tenses used by the subjects in written English were

analyzed; a T-Unit analysis was conducted; and written data were classified into three levels as elementary, intermediate, and advanced groups.

According to the results of T-Unit analysis the researcher states that simple past tense is not a great problem for students but the present perfect is a consistent error. The results show that out of eighteen T-Units in present perfect tense should be written in simple past. The researcher also concludes that the distribution of errors shows that the students use present perfect tense where simple past should be used.

Based on sentence-level data collected from spoken and written English of learners from all over the world, Burt & Kiparsky (1978) find that learners often produce defective sentences when they use the English perfective and progressive aspects. In using the progressive aspect, students forget the auxiliary 'be' more often than they forget the '-ing' morpheme. The examples of syntactically ill-formed sentences are as follows:

- \* In New York I have saw Broadway.
- \* He singing too loudly.
- \* He is sleep now.

In the first example learner fails to form the past participle form of the main verb 'see'. In the second one some form of 'be' is omitted and in the third sentence the '-ing' morpheme which is necessary to form the progressive aspect is omitted.

DeCarrico (1986) shows that tense, aspect, and time in the English modality system constitute problems for learners of English. They generally confuse the modal perfect and present perfective aspect. The sentence given below as an example was elicited from an in-class writing assignment of advanced ESL students who had been to tell how their lives as children would have been different if they had been born of the opposite sex.

- \* I would had gone to a special school for boys.

Here, the student confuses the modal perfect (would + have + -en) which refers to past with the perfective aspect in the past. The student attaches the tense to both the modal and 'have' considering the necessary part of the verb string as a perfective aspect. DeCarrico concludes that although the past tense of a modal is not semantically like the past tense



of a real verb, students sometimes confuse them.

Richards (1979) states that the perfect in English creates problem for both elementary and advanced learners because they interpret the perfect as an alternative to the simple past. Learners use present perfect incorrectly considering its function as an another way of describing definite past events such as;

- \* Yesterday there has been a fire in the library building.
- \* When I have got home last night I have felt ill.

As can be seen from the findings and implications above, non-native speakers have difficulty mastering the tense and aspect system of English both syntactically and semantically/pragmatically. They sometimes form a verb string incorrectly, such as omitting some form of 'be' when forming progressive aspect or misform the past participle form of the main verb in perfective aspect. They also have difficulty conveying the actual discourse meaning of tense and aspect. They fail to express the intended meaning in the context using the tense and aspect incorrectly.

Taking the syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors in the English tense and aspect system made by the learners mentioned above into consideration, a study of the written English of Turkish native speakers, who are first-year undergraduate students, was conducted. In the next chapter, the subjects of the study, the data collection, the data collection instrument, the analysis of data, the identification of the syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors of the English tense and aspect system in the written English of the first-year undergraduate native-Turkish-speakers of learners of English were discussed and the linguistic descriptions of the both types of errors were given.

## CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This study seeks to identify the most common errors made in the verb tense-aspect system in the written discourse of first-year Turkish learners of English. The data was elicited by asking the participants to perform a written task. The research is a study in which tense errors in samples of written discourse are classified and counted, enabling the researcher to state in quantitative terms the relative proportion of each kind of verb tense error.

In this chapter the research methodology used in the study will be presented. The participants, data collection procedure, data collection instrument, type of data, and analysis of data will be described in detail.

### Participants

To select the subjects for this study, the researcher asked permission to the department heads, where the researcher was going to collect the data. After getting the permission the researcher talked to teachers from the same departments and obtained the permission of volunteers to participate in the data collection. Then the researcher told the students that he was going to perform the task during the next class hour.

The subjects are 100 first-year volunteer students at Cumhuriyet University. Forty-two of the subjects are from the Faculty of Medicine, forty-one are from the department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Science and Letters, and seventeen from the School of Nursing. The participants are volunteers among the students of the above mentioned departments.

The native language of all participants is Turkish. Foreign language learning experiences of the students are heterogeneous. Among the students some are graduates of English-medium private or state high schools and some are graduates of state high schools, where English is taught only four or six hours a week as a foreign language.

The first-year students at Cumhuriyet University were chosen as subjects for this study because the researcher is going to teach the first-year undergraduate students at Cumhuriyet University next year and they

were close to the end of their intensive grammar course when the data were collected for this research. Therefore, the most common verb tense errors made by the participants might be clear evidence for their difficulty in learning the tense-aspect system of English.

The researcher presented to the learners the necessary information about the purpose of the study, why the researcher is going to conduct such a study, and why the results of this study are useful for the language teaching and learning process. He also gave information about the type of the data he was going to collect and what the participants were going to write in their essays. Before data collection the subjects were asked to sign a consent form (See Appendix A).

#### Data Collection

The researcher conducted a pilot study using two different data collection instruments to determine which would be most effective in eliciting a variety of verb tenses and aspect. One of them was an imaginary biography (See Appendix B) and the other was an autobiography (See Appendix C). In the first instrument the subjects were given a set of pictures with details of someone's past, present, and future and then asked to write a biographical essay. In the second instrument they were given some written prompts and asked to write an autobiographical essay about their own life. The pilot study was conducted at Middle East Technical University by one of the researcher's colleagues involving first-year university students. The tasks were administered to ten volunteer students in two groups (five students per group). The data of the pilot study revealed that the second instrument was more appropriate for collecting data for this study because it elicited a greater variety of tense and aspect. In the first instrument, the participants used only the simple past tense and the simple future tense, such as 'I did this and that' and 'I will do this and that'. However, in the second, they used variety of tense and aspect, such as the simple present tense, the present progressive tense, the present perfect progressive, the simple future tense, the simple past tense, the past progressive tense, and some modal auxiliaries both in present and past time.

After the data collection instrument was chosen, the researcher

talked to the department heads where the research was conducted and obtained the necessary permission (See Appendix D). The researcher also talked to the teachers who teach at the departments mentioned above to decide the appropriate time for data collection. All of the faculty were very keen on helping the researcher and asked the researcher to collect the data during their class hours.

#### Procedure

At the data collection session, the researcher first distributed a handout (shown in Appendix C) to guide the subjects in writing an autobiographical essay. Then the necessary explanations were provided and the participants were given 40 minutes to write their compositions.

After the data were collected, the researcher read the compositions several times to identify verb tense errors and categorize them into two main types -- syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors.

The syntactic errors were identified by applying the following surface structure formula (Kolln, 1990) to each verb string in the data:

Tense + (Modal) + (have + -en) + (be + -ing) + Main verb

To identify semantic/pragmatic errors, the researcher took the sentence in which the verb string occurs and its discourse and pragmatic context into consideration and identified those instances where the writer's intended meaning deviated from the meaning communicated by the verb string. Where the researcher hesitated about the identification of semantic/pragmatic appropriateness of specific verb strings, he discussed the instances with two colleagues, who are native Turkish speakers and MA TEFL students and with two native English speakers -- his advisor and another MA TEFL student. After identifying all the syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors in the data, the researcher discussed almost 100% of the errors and their classifications with a native speaker of English.

Semantic/pragmatic and syntactic errors were further subdivided into different linguistic categories, using categories identified by Dulay, Burt, & Krashen (1982), and Burt & Kiparsky (1978).

The description of all errors are described in detail in chapter four.

## CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

## Introduction

This chapter summarizes the results of an error analysis of tense and aspect in the written English of Turkish students. The analysis of the data consisted of identifying syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors and then further categorizing and subdividing these into types of errors.

A syntactic error was identified as any error in the syntactic and morphological form of a verb string. The following formula (Kolln, 1990) was used to identify syntactic errors:

$$T (M) + (\text{have} + \text{-en}) + (\text{be} + \text{-ing}) + MV$$

In generating a verb string, tense (T) and the main verb (MV) are only two required elements. Modal (M), perfective aspect (have + -en) and progressive aspect (be + -ing) are optional. The tense marker applies to the first word in the string. Three kinds of auxiliaries are possible: modal (M), have (perfective aspect), and be (progressive aspect) and when more than one is used, they are used in that order. The formula also specifies that with 'have' the '-en' form of the following auxiliary or verb is used; with 'be', the '-ing' form of the following verb. The last word in the string is the main verb. For example, when we want to generate a verb string, which uses the progressive aspect in the present tense, the application is as following:

$$T (\text{present}) + (\text{be} + \text{-ing}) + MV (\text{go})$$

To generate the progressive aspect in present tense, first the present tense is attached to 'be' and then the '-ing' ending is attached to the main verb, generating 'am/is/are going'.

The following are examples of syntactically ill-formed verb strings:

1. \*I am live in Sivas.
2. \*I living in Sivas.

The identification of semantic/pragmatic errors requires a careful reading of the sentence in which the verb occurs and its discourse context in order to infer the intended meaning of the writer. Semantic/pragmatic errors were identified by comparing what the learner should have written to express what she/he most likely intended to say. When no meaning could be inferred, the examples were excluded from analysis. The following terms

shown in Table 2 and 3 (Leech & Svartvik, 1987) were used to describe semantic/pragmatic errors:

Table 2

Tense and Aspect in Present Time

Tense and Aspect	Meaning	Example
The Simple Present Tense	State	I like Mary.
	Single event	I resign.
	Habitual	She gets up early.
The Present Progressive Aspect	Temporary	He's drinking scotch.
	Temporary habit	She's getting up early. (Nowadays)

Table 2 presents the simple present and present progressive aspect with the different discourse meanings they convey in the context. Although the different forms of both the simple present and present progressive are the same, their functions are different depending on their contextual meaning.

Table 3

Tense and Aspect in Past Time

Tense and Aspect	Meaning	Example
The Present Perfective Aspect	State up to present tense	I have known her for years.
	Indefinite event	I have seen better players.
	Habit up to present time	He has conducted that orchestra for 15 years.
	With present result	You have ruined my dress.
The Simple Past Tense	Definite state	I lived in Africa when I was young.
	Definite habit	I got up early in those days.

Table 3 presents the different discourse meanings of the present perfective aspect and the simple past tense depending on their contextual meanings.

Some of the verb strings in the data are both syntactically and semantically/pragmatically ill-formed, as illustrated by the following:

3. \*He study in PTT office.

Here the verb string is both syntactically and semantically/pragmatically ill-formed because the writer omitted both the present tense third person singular morpheme '-s' and used the verb 'study' where the verb 'work' was intended.

#### Syntactic and Semantic/Pragmatic Errors

Table 4 displays the total number and proportion of syntactic errors, which were identified as any error in the syntactic and morphological form of a verb string and semantic/pragmatic errors, which were identified by comparing what the learner wrote to express the intended meaning with the verb strings in the larger context.

Table 4

#### Total Errors in the Corpus

Error Categories	Total Number	Percentage %
Semantic/Pragmatic errors	194	61.39
Syntactic errors	122	38.60

As the percentages and total numbers of the errors show, the majority of the errors were semantic/pragmatic in nature.

#### Semantic/Pragmatic Errors

Table 5 displays the distribution of semantic/pragmatic errors, which fall into 2 categories of error: verb tense and aspect errors and lexical errors. Where the subjects fail to use the correct tense to convey the intended meaning the error was assigned to verb tense and aspect error. For example, if the writer uses any of the tenses or aspects rather than present progressive aspect, in order to express the contextual meaning of a

temporary event or temporary habit, the error was considered as the verb tense and aspect error. When the learners use the verb 'see' where it should be 'look' according to the context, the error was assigned as lexical error.

Table 5

Semantic/pragmatic errors

	Numbers	Percentage %
Verb tense and aspect	139	71.64
Lexical	55	28.35

As numbers and percentages show the major errors are in the area of choice of verb tense and aspect errors (71.64%). Lexical errors constitute 28.35% of the total semantic/pragmatic errors.

Verb tense errors were subcategorized into 4 different types of error shown in Table 6. These error types are the problematic ones which are elicited from the written discourse of the learners participated in this study.

Table 6

Verb tense and aspect errors

	Number	Percentage %
Present tense instead of past tense	43	30.93
Present progressive aspect instead of simple present	34	24.46
Present perfect aspect instead of simple past	32	23.02
Past tense instead of present tense	30	21.58

The largest category of error (30.93%) is use of the present tense instead of past tense. The following example illustrates this type of



error:

4. \*... and my school friends are very good friends in primary school, orta school, and high school.

In example 4, the learner uses the present tense for 'be' where it should be past. The tense refers to something which occurs at the present moment; i.e., it refers to present state. However, the verb should refer to past time because in the context the writer gives information about the time of the event, which is before the time the writer writes. The tense should refer to the time of his/her primary, orta, and high school years, which are in the past.

The sentence in example 5 below is semantically well-formed when removed from the context. However, we cannot evaluate the meaning of a sentence apart from a context. The sentence appears in a context where the surrounding sentences refer to the past and to the student's childhood:

5. \*I have a lot of friends.

The second category of tense error is the inappropriate use of progressive aspect in the present tense. The learners use present progressive in the sense of simple present. That is, in the context in which the learners intend to convey a state, a single event, or a habitual action, which should be expressed in the simple present tense, they use the present progressive aspect. However, the present progressive aspect is used to convey temporary habit or temporary event.

In example 6, for instance, the learner talks about his/her daily activities as a present habit. However, the verb string conveys a temporary habit which is not the intended meaning:

6.\* After the lesson we are eating our lunch and we are going to the house.

The use of progressive aspect in the present tense combines the temporary meaning of the progressive with the repetitive meaning of the habitual present. The events the writer does, according to the context, are not temporary events. In the context the writer intends to convey a sequence of events which is habitual. Therefore, the verb string should be simple present tense rather than progressive aspect in the present.

In example 7, the role of the progressive aspect is to give informa-

tion about a limited duration or a repetition of temporary happenings.

7. \*I am studying lesson.

However, it is clear from context that the writer intends to convey the action 'study' as a part of a sequence of events which is his/her habitual activity. Therefore, the verb string should be in the simple present instead of present progressive.

The third category of tense errors is inappropriate use of the present perfective aspect. Where the simple past tense should be used to express definite state, definite event, or definite habit, the students use present perfect tense which expresses a state up to present time, indefinite events, habit up to present time, or an event with present result in the past.

Although the function of the present perfect tense and its form are different than that of simple past, learners use the perfective aspect in the present as an alternative to the simple past. Although one of the perspectives associated with the use of present perfect in English is called indefinite past event, where no indication is given as to the time it occurred the verb strings produced by the learners were used in a definite past event, where an indication is given as to the time it occurred.

In example 8, the learner gives information about his/her graduation and its date using the perfective aspect in the present tense. The learner uses definite point in the past and the event does not lead up to the present time.

8. \*I have finished Lycee in 1990.

Here, the learner uses the perfective aspect in the present tense as an alternative to the use of past tense stating a definite event with its date in the past. So, since the verb string should convey the definite state in the past, the tense of the verb string should be simple past.

In example 9 below, another learner uses the perfective aspect in the present instead of simple past tense. The writer provides information about a definite time in the past (last year) but uses the perfective aspect in the present, which does not work to convey the intended meaning. The writer should have used simple past tense to express the actual

intended meaning in the discourse.

9. \*She has graduated university last year.

The writer here gives information about the definite past but uses perfective aspect in the present tense which is used when an event leads up to present.

In the last category, shown in Table 6, the errors consist of past tense use instead of present tense. The present tense refers to what happens at the present time. The past tense refers to an event or a state that takes place in the past but not necessarily in the present time. It is used when past happening is related to a definite time in the past, which might be called 'Then'. In example 10 below, the learner inappropriately uses past tense instead of present.

10. \*When I graduated this faculty, I will go to England for post-graduate. When a dependent clause is linked to an independent clause with a subordinating conjunction, the main verb (or modal or auxiliary) of the dependent clause should carry the same tense with the independent clause. In the context, the writer talks about his plans and arrangements for the future. She/he talks about the things that s/he will do after s/he graduates. Therefore, since the use of the tense in the main clause is semantically/pragmatically well-formed, the tense in the independent clause is semantically ill-formed and it should be present tense rather than past.

In example 11, the context demonstrates that the learner intends to indicate that although s/he is living in Sivas at the moment, the writer and her/his family is not from Sivas and his/her family lives in Amasya.

11. \*My family lived in Amasya.

Here, the verb 'lived' refers to a state which occurred in the past. However, according to the context, his/her family still lives in Amasya. Therefore, the verb 'live' should carry the present tense which indicates that the state still continues.

In the context where the sentence mentioned in example 12 takes place, the learner talks about a set of repeating events, which comprise habitual actions in the present. Therefore, the verb string should carry the present tense instead.

12. \*Generally everyday after I had got up, I went to school in the

morning.

The second category of semantic/pragmatic error types consists of lexical choice errors. This category consists of incorrect verb use in a word string in which the subjects fail to convey the intended meaning. Fifty-five errors out of 189 semantic/pragmatic errors (28.35%) were assigned to this category. The following are the examples of incorrect lexical choice:

13. \*I entered the Anatolian High School examination.

In the example above, the main verb used in the word string does not work to convey the intended meaning. The learner substitutes 'enter' for 'take' and it spoils the actual intended meaning in the discourse. The sentence here does not convey the meaning what the writer tries to say appropriately. Therefore the verb 'take' should be used to make the meaning clear.

In the example 14, when we analyze the sentence referring to the context, the verb used in the word string is incorrect and does not work to give the actual intended meaning.

14. \*I will study in Ankara.

The situation in the context is that, the writer talks about a sequence of his/her plans and ideas for future after graduating from the university. In the example 14, the writer wants to give information about the place where s/he will work in the future i.e., after he/she graduates from the university. He substitutes 'study' for 'work' and the substitution causes semantically/pragmatically ill-formedness. To form a syntactically/pragmatically well-formed sentence in order to be able to convey the actual intended meaning, the verb 'work' should be used in the word string.

#### Syntactic Errors

Table 7 presents the distribution of syntactic errors both in numbers and percentage. Syntactic errors fall into four categories, which are: 1) misuse of the progressive aspect, 2) lack of subject verb agreement, 3) omission of verb, and 4) misordered verb string. The largest group of the syntactic errors are (33.60%) in the area of the misuse of the progressive aspect, which is presented as 'be + ING', either in the past or present tense.

Table 7

Syntactic errors

	Number	Percentage%
Misuse of progressive aspect	41	33.60
Lack of subject-verb agreement	37	30.32
Omission of verb	33	27.04
Misordered verb string	11	9.01

The learners misform progressive aspect either by omitting 'be' or '-ing'. The following examples illustrate this type of error:

15. \*I will be visit Europe in the future.

16. \*My family living in Ankara now.

In example 15, the writer fails to add the '-ing' morpheme to the next element in the verb string -- the verb visit. In example 16, the writer fails to use a form of the auxiliary 'be', whose presence is obligatory for the formation of the progressive aspect.

Table 8 shows the subcategories of the misuse of progressive aspect. As shown in Table 8, the omission of the auxiliary 'be' (63.41%) is more common than the omission of '-ing' morpheme (36.58%).

Table 8

Misuse of progressive aspect

	Number	Percentage %
Omission of 'be'	26	63.41
Omission of '-ing'	15	36.58

The second major category of syntactic errors is in the area of subject-verb agreement. Of the total number of syntactic errors in verb strings in the data, 30.32% are errors in subject-verb agreement.

In this category, the errors are categorized by: the presence of a

linguistic item which must not appear in a well-formed verb string; the absence of a linguistic item that must appear in a well-formed verb string; incorrect use of copula. The following examples illustrate this type of errors:

17. \*My brother attend Lycee.

In example 17, the writer fails to use the present tense third person singular morpheme '-s' to agree with the third person singular subject.

In example 18, the writer uses the present tense third person singular morpheme '-s' for a first person plural subject, making it syntactically ill-formed:

18. \*We looks like a real family.

The learners also make errors in subject-verb agreement when using the copula 'be', as shown in examples 19 and 20.

19. \*All my friends was.....

20. \*My father are.....

The third linguistic category of the syntactic errors is the omission of the main verb -- the linguistic item which indicates the event, action or state in the word string. The errors in this area are subclassified into two categories. Table 9 displays the subclassification of omission of verbs.

Table 9

Omission of Verbs

	Number	Percentage %
Omission of copula	26	78.78
Omission of main verb	7	21.21

As seen in table 9, 26 (78.78%) errors out of 33 are the omission of the copula and 7 (21.21) out of 33 are omission of main verb (other than copula). That is, the first noticeable part of the categorization is the omission of 'copula' rather than 'other verbs'.

21. \*I want to go to Japan where very interesting for me.

In the example 21, the writer fails to use the copula, which should be in the dependent clause. The absence of the copula makes the word string syntactically ill-formed.

In the example 22 below, the sentence is semantically ill-formed because there is no linguistic item that indicates the action, event or state in the word string.

22. \*I to be a nurse.

Possibly, the writer fails to use a verb which might be 'want' because in the context she talks about her wishes for her future life.

The smallest class of syntactic error in the data is misordering of the elements in the verb string. The following sentences illustrate this kind of error:

23. \* I have been one years living in Sivas.

24. \* My friend's is name Birsen.

25. \* I cannot remember clearly how was my childhood.

The learners fail to order the verb strings appropriately in the examples given above. As in example 23, the learner should use the present participle form of the main verb after the past participle form of the auxiliary 'be'. In example 24, the copula should follow the subject, which is 'my friend's name' of the word string. In example 25, the learner forms the dependent clause in the question form whereas it should be direct word order. That is, the copula should follow the subject of the word string, which is 'my childhood'.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS

### Introduction

This chapter presents the summary of the study. In addition, the chapter reports on the findings and discusses the results. The significance of the findings will be discussed with the results of the studies mentioned in the literature review chapter. Later, pedagogical implications will be suggested and some implications for further research will be presented.

### Summary of the Study

The main objective of this study was to define the most common errors made in the verb tense and aspect system in the written English of Turkish students. The data used in the study was elicited by asking the participants to perform a written task. The participants of the study were first-year undergraduate learners of English in an EFL situation. The participants had six to seven years language learning experience and were completing a grammar course. In the process of the data analysis, only the verb strings were taken into consideration. The verb strings in the written discourse of the learners were categorized into syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors. The errors were described in detail in the data analysis chapter (chapter 4).

The process of error analysis was based on a major objective which provides a clear picture for instructors, researchers, curriculum designers, and textbook writers, where the learners of English have difficulties in using English tense and aspect at discourse level.

### Findings

Totally 316 syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors were elicited from one hundred samples of written discourse. Classification of the errors shows that the majority of the corpus of errors (61.39%) are semantic/pragmatic errors. Syntactic errors constitute 38.60% of the errors. This result supports Copperties' (1987 as cited in Hinkle, 1992) findings that the perception of tense meaning of non-native speakers are not nativelike.

Semantic/pragmatic errors fall into two categories. The first one is verb tense errors and the second one is lexical choice errors. Within the



total number of semantic/pragmatic errors, the majority of errors are in the area of verb tense choice. Verb tense errors constitute 71.64% of the total number of semantic/pragmatic errors; lexical choice errors constitute 28.35%.

A subcategorization of the verb tense errors indicates that the inappropriate use of the present tense ( 30.93%) is the most frequent error. Compared to the findings of related research (Hinkle, 1992), this proportion contradicts that of Hinkle's. Hinkle states that the simple present tense is not as difficult as the other present tenses -- except the present progressive, the present perfect progressive , and the present perfect -- for NNSs. However, the simple present tense reflects the considerable difficulty according to the results of the errors elicited from the data used for the presented study. Inappropriate use of the present tense -- in their attempt to express a happening taking place in the past time which does not lead up to present, learners have used present tense where simple past tense should have been used to express a definite event in the past -- constitutes 30.93% of the total number of verb tense errors.

Inappropriate use of present progressive aspect constitutes 24.46% of the total verb tense errors. Learners have used present progressive aspect to express state, habitual, or a single event which should have been expressed by simple present tense. The findings of the presented study support Bland's (1988) and Richards' (1981) findings that present progressive aspect is problematic for learners of English.

Of the total verb tense errors, 23.02% are inappropriate use of the present perfect aspect. Learners have used the present perfect aspect to convey a definite state, definite event or definite habit. However, since the happening, in the context, refers to a definite time in the past, the tenses used in the verb strings should have been simple past tense. Aycan's (1990) study of native Turkish students also indicates that the present perfect tense constitutes a problem. Learners of English use present perfect tense where they should use simple past tense. The findings of this study also support Richards' (1979) implication that learners interpret the perfect tense as an alternative to simple past tense

and use present perfect as another way of describing definite past events.

The smallest category of the verb tense and aspect errors (21.58%) is use of the past tense instead of the present tense. The learners have used the past tense to express a happening, such as a state, habitual or a single event which occurs at the present moment. However, the verb strings should have been in present tense. Although, the results of the presented study show that native Turkish speakers of English learners have difficulty with conveying intended meaning in simple past tense in the written discourse, it contradicts the findings of Ayca's study (1990). She concludes that past tense is not a problem for the subjects in her study. On the other hand, the findings of this study support Riddle's (1986) implication that even very advanced students make errors in using past tense although their native languages have past tense.

The distribution of syntactic errors shows that the misformation of the progressive aspect (39.60%) constitutes the most frequent type of syntactic error. In their attempt to generate a progressive aspect, the learners may fail to attach the '-ing' morpheme to the main verb or may fail to use a form of the auxiliary 'be'.

The second most difficult area of syntax is subject-verb agreement. Subject-verb agreement errors constitute 30.32% of the total number of syntactic errors. The learners failed to match the subject with the verb in terms of person and number by using the inappropriate form of the auxiliary 'be' or by misusing the present tense third person singular morpheme '-s'.

The third most difficult area of syntax is the omission of the verb, which constitutes 27.04% of the errors. The subjects have omitted either the copula or the main verb.

The last difficult area of syntax is the appropriate use of verb string in the word string. Misordered verb strings constitute 9.01% of the total number of the syntactic errors.

Within the syntactic error categories, omission of verb and misuse of progressive aspect were subcategorized. The subcategories of omission of verb are 'omission of copula' and 'omission of main verb'. Omission of the

copula (78.78%) constitutes the vast majority of the corpus and 21.21% of the corpus is omission of main verb. The subcategories of misuse of the progressive aspect are omission of the auxiliary 'be' and omission of the '-ing' morpheme. Omission of the auxiliary 'be' constitutes 63.41% of the total number of misuse of progressive aspect; omission of '-ing' errors constitute 28.35%. Like Burt & Kiparsky (1978), the findings of this research indicate that learners omit the auxiliary 'be' more than the '-ing' morpheme.

#### Interpretation of the Findings

Although the data collection instrument elicited a variety of tense and aspect errors, it failed to elicit some of the twelve traditional tenses in the English tense and aspect system. The twelve traditional English tenses are: simple present; present progressive; simple past; past progressive; simple future; future progressive; present perfect; present perfect progressive; past perfect; past perfect progressive; future perfect; and future perfect progressive (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983). Therefore, the findings may not be representative of verb-tense and aspect errors which Turkish speakers may make in different contexts. In addition, in considering the difficulties the students have with the form and meaning of the tense and aspect system in English, since the data failed to elicit the use of twelve traditional tenses, it may not be interpreted that the learners who participated in this study do not have difficulty with the tenses (i.e., past perfect, past perfect progressive, future perfect, future perfect progressive, future progressive, and past progressive) that are not mentioned in the error corpus in the study. It may not be interpreted that the learners have acquired some of the traditional tenses used in English grammar. However, the findings of this study might be useful for EFL teachers, who are curious about how learners of English perceive form and meaning of a verb string in the English verb tense and aspect system. The findings may also be useful for textbook writers and curriculum and syllabus designers.

In the light of the findings of the presented study, we may conclude that syntactic maturity of the first-year undergraduate native Turkish speakers of English learners is higher than their semantic/pragmatic

maturity. The greatest difficulty the students have with the English verb tense and aspect system is in conveying the intended discourse meaning of a verb string in context.

Semantic/pragmatic errors show that the most problematic area is inappropriate use of the present and past tenses in their contextual meaning. They use present tense where past tense should be used or they use past tense instead of present tense.

The present progressive also constitutes problems for the learners. The present progressive aspect is used in free variation with the simple present tense in a context where they intend to express habitual event, state, or a single event.

The present perfect tense is another problematic area for the learners. They seem to have difficulty distinguishing the discourse meaning of the present perfect tense versus the past tense. They use the present perfect tense as an alternative to the simple past tense. The results of the study show that it is not clear for the learners where the use of present perfect tense and the past tense differ depending on their contextual meanings.

The semantic/pragmatic errors elicited from the data used for the presented study are not surprising because of the prior instruction, and L1 transfer. The reason that causes difficulty in using the English tense and aspect system appropriately might be because of teaching the form and the function of the system at sentence level. The learners might not adequately understand the actual meaning and discourse functions of the English tense and aspect system since it is not contextualized and teaching is generally based on only presenting the rules of the English tense and aspect system. L1 interference might also cause difficulty. Since there is no tense in Turkish that completely corresponds to the English present perfect tense, they might transfer L1 tense meanings to L2 tense and aspect system. In addition, since the use of the Turkish simple present and the present progressive tenses are similar, they might think that the meanings of the English simple present and present progressive tenses are interchangeable.

In addition to the semantic/pragmatic errors, the results of the

study indicate that the syntactic forms of the English tense and aspect system constitute problems for the learners, but not as much as the semantic/pragmatic errors. The learners have difficulty with forming a verb string appropriately. They fail to use a linguistic item in a verb string, such as omitting copula, auxiliary 'be', or '-ing' morpheme, which is required in a well-formed English sentence structure. In addition, subject verb agreement constitutes a problematic area for the first year undergraduate students. They fail to make the verb agree with the subject. For example, they use singular form of the auxiliary 'be' with plural subjects or plural form of the auxiliary 'be' with singular subjects and fail to use the present tense third person singular morpheme '-s', or attach third person singular morpheme '-s' to plural subjects.

#### Pedagogical Implications

Since the data presented in this study requires further investigation and the difficulties the students have cannot be generalized to all the traditional English tenses, only some general suggestions and implications for teaching can be offered.

Since tense and aspect interact with meaning, social function, or discourse -- or a combination of these -- in planning how to incorporate the teaching of tense and aspect into a language syllabus, teachers first need to begin with a clear understanding of how this grammatical system functions in English. Teachers should certainly not make an attempt to make the English tense and aspect system match the tense system of the learners' native language.

The most important teaching consideration coming out of the preceding study results is that all learning of the English tense and aspect should take place in context. To facilitate the learners' understanding of tense and aspect meaning, language should be taught in a real life situation.

It may be necessary to create a separate lesson to indicate the different discourse functions of a tense or an aspect. Depending on which tense or aspect the teacher is presenting or reviewing, certain key questions might be used to establish the context, appropriate time axis, and contextual meaning of tense and aspect. A new form might be taught through its association with a context. Students should be actively

involved in using the language.

Rather than presenting ready-made explanations to the students, teachers might provide the learners with examples first and then ask them to formulate their own hypotheses. This might encourage active analysis by the students of real language input and prepare them for a more complete explanation by teachers. Teachers may also ask students to collect examples in context from speech or writing and to explain why that tense or aspect was used in each case. This may help them to build monitoring and analytical skills which enable learning beyond the classroom walls.

Students can even be asked to prepare exercises based on different forms and meanings of tense and aspect. This helps them to solidify their understanding of the tense and aspect and can heighten their interests.

Published classroom materials may not be sufficient enough to describe the situational context of tense and aspect. Therefore, teachers might prepare materials which enable students to compare the different contextual meaning of tense and aspect. For example, mini-dialogues with blanks for the relevant tenses can be composed by the instructor, with space provided for the students to give brief reasons for their choice of tense or aspect. It is also helpful to devise as many real situations in the classroom as possible to illustrate and practice tense and aspect.

#### Implications for Further Research

In order to understand whether the errors are performance-based or competence-based, a further study might be conducted. After having students write an essay, the researcher may just underline both syntactic and semantic errors without making any explanation of the errors and ask the subjects to correct their mistakes. Then the results of the second analysis of the written discourse might give the researcher clues about performance or competence-based errors.

Other research might be conducted to identify the most common tense and aspect errors in the spoken English of native-Turkish-speaking, first-year undergraduate learners of English as a foreign language. The proportion of the syntactic and semantic/pragmatic errors, which will be elicited from the spoken English might be compared with the errors elicited from the written English of the same population.

Further research in which only one tense is studied could be assessed and might investigate the most difficult areas in learning the English tense and aspect system.

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## Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

I agree to participate in a research study of error analysis. I have been told that the purpose of this study is to help EFL learners, and to improve their academic performance, and the results will contribute to foreign language teaching/learning process. I know that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I will participate in the data collection session as part of this study. I am also sure that my name will not be used in the reports and that the essay that I will write will not be shown to anyone else except the researcher and his advisor.

I give my permission to the researcher to use my essay for the purpose of evaluating the research process.

Name-Surname:

Signature:

Date:

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INFORMED CONSENT FORM

If there are any questions about this study, you may contact either the researcher:

Mehmet Kadir Sahin  
MA TEFL Student  
Bilkent University

or the study advisor:

Dr. Ruth Yontz  
MA TEFL Program  
Bilkent University

## Appendix B

An Imaginary Biography

## Turning Points in Murat's Life

- 1965 Born in Ankara
- 1977 Graduate from high school
- 1978 Attend Bilkent University in Ankara
- 1983 Graduate from university
- 1984 Serve in Turkish Army
- 1987 Do MA in TEFL at Bilkent
- 1990 Get married
- 1993 Have a son
- 1996 Return to Bilkent for a Ph.D.
- 2002 Get a Ph.D. in Education
- 2010 Become a Professor at Bilkent

## Appendix C

An Autobiography

WRITE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY (story of your own life) USING THE CLUES GIVEN BELOW

Write in the **THREE** paragraphs

The First Paragraph (choose **some** of these)

- your childhood
- your education
- where/when you were born
- your friends
- place(s) you lived
- place(s) you visited

The Second Paragraph (choose **some** of these)

- what you do everyday
- what you like/dislike most in your life
- your education now
- your family now
- your friends
- where you are living now/what it is like
- how many years you have been a student or living in Sivas

The Third Paragraph (choose **some** of these)

- your expectations for the future (after you graduate from university)
- what kind of life you think you will have
- where you will be living in the future
- what your job will be

## Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Dear Sir,

You are kindly asked to permit the researcher to elicit the data for his study from the first year undergraduate students of your department.

The data collection session will last fifty minutes. The students will be asked to write an autobiographical essay and the data will be used for a research study of error analysis.

Could you be kind enough to give permission to the researcher to collect the necessary data for his study.

If you like to have more information about the study, you could either call the researcher:

Mehmet Kadir Sahin  
MA TEFL Student  
Bilkent University

or his advisor:

Dr. Ruth Yontz  
MA TEFL Program  
Bilkent University

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I have read the request of the researcher on the informed consent form and permitted him to collect that he needs for his study.

Name-Surname:

Signature: