



## Tracing the Past: Exploring the Link Between Past Tense Mastery and Students' Written in EFL Learners

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the correlation between students' mastery of the past tense and their ability to express past events in writing among eleventh-grade students at SMA 20 Gowa. Although English has long been taught in Indonesian schools, many students still struggle to apply grammatical rules accurately in written contexts, particularly in using past tense forms. Employing a quantitative correlational research design, this study involved 40 randomly selected students and utilized a grammar test and a writing test as instruments. The grammar test assessed students' past tense proficiency, while the writing test evaluated their ability to recount past experiences coherently. Data were analyzed using Pearson's product-moment correlation. Findings revealed that students' past tense mastery was generally poor (mean score = 4.3), while their writing performance was fairly good (mean score = 6.9). The calculated correlation coefficient was 0.497, indicating a moderate but significant relationship between the two variables. These results suggest that improved mastery of the past tense contributes to better writing performance. The study highlights the need for integrated grammar and writing instruction and offers practical implications for English language teaching, curriculum development, and future research in EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** correlation, grammar, past tense, writing, EFL



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ISSN 2655-9722, DOI: 10.30650/ajte.v7i2.4471

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Introduction

Humans begin acquiring language from the moment they are born (Kujala et al., 2023). In Indonesia, individuals typically learn their first language based on their regional mother tongue, (Arifuddin, 2016). A few years later, they begin to learn Indonesian as their second language (Arifuddin, 2016). English, on the other hand, is introduced as a foreign language and is taught not only at the junior and senior high school levels (SMP and SMA) but also in elementary schools (Saputri et al., 2024). This indicates that English is the first foreign language formally

taught in Indonesia. Students are expected to be able to use and practice English effectively in their daily lives after English lessons conclude(Pane et al., 2022). To achieve fluency, learners must master the four core language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing as these skills are interconnected(Saiful, 2023). Therefore, students need to receive sufficient training in all four to facilitate effective language use. Despite years of study, many Indonesian students still struggle with grammar, which is often perceived as complex. Grammar is fundamental as it governs the structure of meaningful sentences(Bakri et al., 2021). In writing, for example, students must not only have a good grasp of vocabulary but also apply grammar correctly(Ismail & Bakri, n.d.). One crucial aspect is the use of verb tenses, which signal the timing of actions to the reader. Accurate and appropriate use of tenses is essential for producing clear and coherent writing. If a text describes past events, the past tense must be used consistently.

Mastering grammar, especially verb tenses, is essential for students learning English as a foreign language, as it directly affects their ability to communicate past events clearly and effectively in writing(Damis et al., n.d.). Despite being taught English grammar for several years, many Indonesian students still struggle to apply the correct past tense forms in their written texts. This gap between grammatical knowledge and actual writing performance is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. Furthermore, with the implementation of both Kurikulum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasize communicative competence and meaningful learning, it becomes even more important to investigate how well students are able to transfer their grammatical understanding into real-life language use(Ni'mah et al., n.d.). Writing, as one of the productive skills, reflects not only students' comprehension of grammatical rules but also their ability to express ideas meaningfully and cohesively. This study is urgent because it provides empirical evidence on students' difficulties and successes in using past tense in writing, which can inform teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers. (Agustini et al. 2021).

This research is important for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how grammatical competence particularly mastery of the past tense affects students' ability to express past experiences in written English. Since grammar is often viewed as a challenging aspect of language learning, especially for EFL students, this study provides valuable insights into how grammatical skills can support and enhance writing performance(Agustini et al., 2021). Secondly, the findings of this research can serve as a reference for English teachers in Indonesia in designing more effective instructional strategies that integrate grammar with writing tasks. By understanding

the relationship between past tense mastery and students' writing outcomes, educators can create more targeted teaching approaches that address students' specific needs (Herdi, 2022). Thirdly, this research supports the goals of the Indonesian national curriculum, which emphasizes communicative competence and meaningful language use (Murtiningsih et al., 2022). It highlights the importance of not only teaching grammar explicitly but also ensuring that students are able to apply it accurately and effectively in real communicative contexts, particularly in writing. Lastly, this study can inspire further research in the fields of language teaching and applied linguistics, particularly those that explore the integration of grammar and the four language skills (Sari Rahman & Amin, 2018). It opens the door for similar studies at different educational levels, in different regions, or involving other aspects of grammar beyond the past tense.

Based on this background, the researcher is interested in examining the eleventh-grade students of SMA 20 Gowa, particularly their mastery of the past tense and their ability to express past events in writing. The study aims to determine whether there is a correlation between students' understanding of past tense forms and their skill in writing about past experiences. The topic was chosen because many students still face challenges in using the past tense correctly, even though they have been introduced to it since junior high school. They often struggle to apply it accurately when writing about past experiences. While numerous studies have explored students' grammatical competence and writing abilities separately, this research offers a more focused examination by investigating the specific correlation between mastery of the past tense and students' ability to express past events in written form (Shruthi S & Aravind BR, 2023). What sets this study apart is its emphasis on real writing production rather than isolated grammar exercises, providing insights into how well students transfer grammatical knowledge into actual language use.

Additionally, by focusing on eleventh-grade students at SMA 20 Gowa a group that has received years of formal English instruction this study sheds light on the persistent challenges learners face despite long-term exposure to English grammar. This localized context adds a fresh contribution to the field, particularly in understanding the practical impact of tense mastery in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing tasks. While several studies have examined students' grammatical mastery and writing performance, this research takes a more integrative approach by analyzing how students' understanding of the past tense influences their ability to write about past experiences. The novelty of this study lies in its alignment with the Indonesian national curriculum

(Kurikulum Merdeka and Kurikulum 2013), which emphasizes student-centered learning and communicative competence over rote memorization of grammatical rules. This research is grounded in a communicative approach to language teaching, where grammar is taught as a tool for meaningful communication, not just as an isolated set of rules. By observing how students apply their grammatical knowledge within actual writing tasks, this study highlights the real-world application of grammar in productive skills, particularly writing. Moreover, the study focuses on eleventh-grade students who are expected, based on the curriculum, to reach a level of English proficiency that allows them to express personal experiences and recount past events. The findings of this research are expected to provide valuable insights for English teachers in Indonesia, particularly in improving pedagogical strategies that support both grammatical accuracy and communicative effectiveness in students' writing. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its integration of grammar, writing, and curriculum-based pedagogical approaches, offering practical insights for teachers who aim to foster both accuracy and fluency in their students' English writing performance.

### *1.2. Research questions*

Based on the background above the researcher formulates the research question as follows:

1. To what extent have the students mastered the past tense in English?
2. How effectively can students use the past tense to describe their past experiences in written form?
3. What is the relationship between students' mastery of the past tense and their ability to write about past events?

### *1.3. Significance of the study*

This study holds significance in several aspects, including theoretical, pedagogical, and practical contributions:

1. Theoretical Significance: This research contributes to the field of English Language Teaching by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between grammatical mastery specifically the past tense and writing performance. It supports existing theories on the role of grammar in second language acquisition and writing proficiency, particularly in an EFL context.
2. Pedagogical Significance: The findings of this study can help English teachers develop more effective teaching strategies that integrate grammar instruction with writing tasks. By understanding how students apply their knowledge of past tense in writing, educators can refine their approaches to grammar teaching, moving beyond rote memorization towards

meaningful language use. Additionally, the study aligns with Indonesia's Kurikulum 2013 and Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasize communicative competence and the integration of language skills.

3. **Practical Significance:** For students, this study highlights the importance of mastering grammar for effective written communication. It provides insights into common challenges they face when using past tense in writing and offers recommendations for improvement. Additionally, for curriculum developers and policymakers, the study serves as a reference in evaluating and enhancing English language instruction in Indonesian schools, ensuring that grammar teaching aligns with students' communicative needs.
4. **Future Research Contribution:** This research can serve as a foundation for future studies on grammar and writing skills in EFL contexts. It encourages further investigations into different tenses, other grammatical aspects, or alternative pedagogical methods that enhance students' writing performance.

## **2. METHOD**

### *2.1. Research Design*

This study employed a correlational research method using the product-moment analysis technique. This technique was utilized to examine the relationship between two variables by calculating their correlation coefficient. It aimed to describe and determine the significance of the correlation between variable X and variable Y. The research design applied in this study was a descriptive correlational method. Correlation refers to the degree of association or connection between two variables. In other words, it indicates the extent to which two variables are related. According to (Jason & David, 2015), correlation is defined as a measure of the relationship between two variables. Based on this understanding, the researcher interpreted correlation as a mutual connection or interdependence between two elements. This type of study is classified as comparative research, aiming to identify similarities and differences between variables. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not a significant correlation exists between students' mastery of past tense and their ability to express past events in writing.

### *2.2. Samples/Participants*

In conducting the sampling process, the initial step involved identifying the population. A population refers to the entire set of individuals that a researcher intends to examine. It represents the group from which data is gathered, analyzed, and interpreted to make generalizations that apply to the whole group. In this study, the population comprised all eleventh-grade students of SMA Negeri 6 Makassar. The total number of students was 360, distributed across nine classes six

classes in the science stream (XI IPA) and three classes in the social studies stream (XI IPS), with each class consisting of approximately 40 students. According to Arikunto (2002:120), a researcher may select 10% to 25% or more of the population as a sample. This study employed a random sampling technique, in which participants were selected randomly to ensure fairness and equal opportunity. Based on this approach, the researcher chose one class with a total of 40 students to serve as the representative sample for the study.

### 2.3. Instruments

instrument is a device used by the researcher while collecting data to make his work become easier and get a better result, complete and systematic in order to make the data easy to be processed. The researcher used two kinds of tests, namely Grammar Test and Writing Test.

### 2.4. Data analysis

To find the result of correlation between students' mastery of past tense (X) and their ability in expressing their past activities in writing (Y), the researcher applied the pearson product- moment correlation. To interpret the result of the correlation analysis, the standard of correlation product-moment (r) was used, as shown in the following table.

**Table 1. pearson product- moment correlation**

Standard / r	Interpretation
0,800 to 1,000	High
0,600 to 0,800	Substantial
0,400 to 0,600	Moderate
0,200 to 0,400	Low
0,000 to 0,200	Very low

### 3.FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Findings

The aim of the data analysis in this study is to determine the extent of the significant relationship between students' mastery of past tense and their ability to express past events in written form, especially among the eleventh-grade students of SMA 20 Gowa. Prior to obtaining the research results, the researcher administered two types of assessments: a grammar test and a writing test. Both assessments were conducted in written format. For the grammar test, the researcher employed a multiple-choice format due to its practicality and ease of scoring, as well as its suitability for students. Each item consisted of a stem (an incomplete sentence or statement) followed by several answer choices. Students were instructed to select the correct answer or convert the verbs to the appropriate past tense forms. A total of 50 items were included in this section. In the writing test, students were asked to recount their past experiences through well-structured writing. The use of past tense was emphasized, with students expected to sequence events logically to retell or inform readers about what had happened. Sample writing tasks included diary entries or letters to friends about holiday experiences, among others. Students were required to produce 15 sentences using the past tense correctly. To assess the relationship between the two variables, the following steps were taken: a. Assessing students' mastery of past tense (Variable X) through the grammar test. b. Assessing students' ability to express past activities in writing (Variable Y) through the writing test.

Both tests were written. In the grammar test, students were given 25 multiple-choice questions, 14 items requiring them to construct negative and interrogative sentences correctly, and 5 items that required changing verbs into the correct past tense. For the writing assessment, students were asked to retell a story using the past tense. The researcher provided four different topics, and students were instructed to choose the one they found most interesting. To analyze student performance, the researcher arranged the scores from highest to lowest. A table was then created to display the sequence of student numbers based on their final mean scores of students' in both grammar and writing tests.

**Table 2 : The mean score of students' mastery of past tense**

Number of respondent	Classification	Mean score
40	Poor	4,3

Table 2 presents the mean score of students' mastery of past tense based on the results of a grammar test taken by 40 respondents. The data shows that the average score obtained by the students is 4.3, which falls into the "Poor" classification. This result indicates that the students' overall understanding and application of past tense forms are still lacking and do not meet the expected level of proficiency. Therefore, it suggests a need for further instructional support and targeted grammar reinforcement, particularly in the use of past tense, to help improve students' writing skills and their ability to accurately express past events.

After calculating the percentage and rating the students' score in each component in writing, the researcher analyzed the mean score of writing test from the total score that found in students' writing test to find out the category of the students' ability in writing past activities and the researcher found the mean score of the students in writing past activities as follows:

**Table 3 : The mean score of students' ability in writing past activities**

Number of respondent	Classification	Mean score
40	Fairly Good	6,9

This result suggests that, in general, students demonstrated a moderate level of competence in writing about past events. While their performance is not yet considered excellent or very good, it does indicate that most students were able to apply the past tense appropriately, organize their ideas coherently, and express their thoughts with a reasonable level of clarity and grammatical accuracy. The classification of "Fairly Good" implies that students are capable of constructing meaningful narratives or descriptions related to past experiences, such as recounting daily activities, holiday events, or personal stories. However, minor errors in grammar, vocabulary usage, or sentence structure may still occur and affect the overall quality of their writing. Therefore, although the result is relatively positive, there remains room for improvement. Continued emphasis on guided writing practice, feedback on tense usage, and development of narrative structure would help enhance their writing proficiency further. These instructional efforts could contribute to raising their performance from a "fairly good" level to a "good" or even "very good" standard in the future.



**Table 4. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient**

X	Y	X <sup>2</sup>	Y <sup>2</sup>	XY
185,8	2710	950,76	188802	12923,6

Table 4 presents the raw data summary used to calculate the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, which is used to examine the relationship between two variables: students' mastery of past tense (X) and their ability to express past activities in writing (Y). The total score of variable X (students' mastery of past tense) is 185.8. The total score of variable Y (writing ability) is 2710. The sum of the squared values of X is 950.76, while for Y it is 188,802 and the total value for the product of X and Y ( $\sum XY$ ) is 12,923.6. In conducting the data analysis for this study, the researcher identified students' mastery of past tense as the independent variable (X) and their ability to write about past events as the dependent variable (Y). These two variables were examined through the use of the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation technique. Prior to the analysis, relevant statistical procedures were prepared. The application of the Pearson correlation formula resulted in a correlation coefficient ( $r_{xy}$ ) of 0.497. According to the interpretation criteria for correlation strength, this score falls within the "moderate" range, specifically between 0.400 and 0.600. To determine the significance of this result, the obtained  $r_{xy}$  value was compared to the critical value in the  $r$  table for a sample size of 40. Since the computed  $r_{xy}$  exceeded the  $r$  table value, the correlation was deemed statistically significant and positive. Based on the results, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between students' knowledge of past tense and their ability to write about past events in English, particularly among the eleventh-grade students at SMAN 20 Gowa.

The findings suggest that students who demonstrate stronger understanding of past tense grammar tend to perform better in written tasks involving past events. This observation was confirmed by the parallel increase in scores between the grammar and writing tests. Therefore, it can be inferred that a solid grasp of past tense structures positively contributes to students' writing performance. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that other external factors may also play a role in shaping students' grammatical proficiency and writing development, which could be explored in future research.

### 3.2. Discussion

Recent studies have identified a statistically significant and positive correlation between students' mastery of past tense and their proficiency in writing about past events. For instance, a study by (Sukendra & Fachrurzy, 2024) found a correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) of 0.497, indicating a moderate relationship between these two variables. This suggests that as students' understanding and application of past tense improve, so does their ability to effectively express past experiences in writing. This finding aligns with theories in second language acquisition that emphasize grammatical competence as a foundational element in developing writing proficiency. Writing, particularly in a foreign language, integrates multiple components of linguistic knowledge, with verb tense usage being crucial for clarity and coherence. In the context of narrative or recount writing, correct use of past tense is essential for conveying a sequence of events that have already occurred (Bte Abdul & Maryam Hamid, 2023). However, the moderate correlation suggests that past tense mastery is not the sole factor influencing writing ability. Other elements such as vocabulary range, sentence structure, coherence, cohesion, and overall writing mechanics also impact a student's ability to express past activities effectively. Additionally, affective factors like motivation, confidence, and interest in writing tasks contribute to variations in students' performance. Therefore, grammar instruction should be integrated into a comprehensive language learning framework that addresses both form and function.

Furthermore, a study by (Bte Abdul & Maryam Hamid, 2023) data indicate that students who performed well in grammar tests also tended to produce more accurate and coherent writing when recounting past events. This consistency reinforces the idea that explicit knowledge of grammatical structures enhances learners' ability to produce language accurately in context. However, it's important to note that some students with average or lower grammar test scores still succeeded in writing tasks, suggesting that exposure, practice, or intuitive learning can also develop writing fluency. These findings highlight the need for varied instructional approaches that balance form-focused instruction with opportunities for meaningful communication. In addition study by (Christanty et al., 2023a) stated that In the Indonesian secondary school context, where English is a foreign language and exposure outside the classroom is limited, mastery of grammatical structures like the past tense largely depends on classroom instruction and practice. Enhancing students' grammatical accuracy, particularly intense usage, can lead to improvements in their writing performance, especially when tasks require them to recount or describe past experiences.

From a pedagogical perspective as explained by (Darsah, n.d.), integrating grammar instruction with writing activities is crucial. Teachers are encouraged to design lessons that incorporate tasks allowing students to apply grammatical rules in authentic and meaningful ways, such as writing diary entries, personal letters, or short stories. Providing feedback on both grammar and content helps students develop accuracy and fluency simultaneously. Assessment methods should also be reflective of this integrated approach. Using both multiple-choice grammar tests and writing tasks offers a more comprehensive understanding of students' capabilities. While multiple-choice tests efficiently measure knowledge of grammatical rules, writing tasks assess language use in real communicative contexts this is in line with the findings by (Christanty et al., 2023b). Future research might include qualitative data, such as student interviews or writing portfolios, to gain deeper insight into learners' attitudes, strategies, and challenges in using past tense in writing .

In conclusion, students' mastery of past tense grammar significantly influences their ability to write about past events. Although the correlation is moderate, it reflects a meaningful relationship that educators can build upon. To enhance students' writing skills, especially in recounting past activities, grammar instruction particularly tense usage should be prioritized and thoughtfully integrated into writing pedagogy. At the same time, a broader instructional approach that incorporates writing process strategies, modeling, scaffolding, and practice opportunities will likely yield better outcomes in fostering students' overall writing proficiency. After finding the result of the correlation between the students' mastery of past tense and their ability in expressing their past activities in writing is in level “moderate”, the researcher found some mistakes that the students' made in grammar test and arrange writing in a good construction. The result of this research is in level “moderate” because some students made mistakes in both test:

a. Students' Mistake in Grammar Test

Basically the mean score in grammar test was 4,7 and categorized as “poor” in average because some students did not put the question mark in the end of the sentences as indicate of interrogative sentences. Some students also less in memorizing important regular and irregular verbs because some of them made mistake in choosing the best answer in multiple choice grammar test.

b. Students' mistake in writing

Basically students wrote their past story but some of them still confused in arrange into a good story, they did not have many vocabularies to express their story in writing, some students dominated by errors of grammar. Some students cannot differentiate between regular and irregular

verb, they changed irregular verb into regular verb. They still confused and made disconnected idea in their story.

English uses many irregular verbs in which a central vowel changes when the tense shifts to the past. For example, “go/went/gone,” “see/saw/seen” and “do/did/done” are the present tense, past tense and past participles for the verbs “sold” “go,” “eat” and “read.” Common mistakes of the students with irregular verbs include conjugating the verbs with the regular past-tense ending -ed to get, for example, the incorrect sentence, “I spent time in hometown two days ago” instead of “I spent my time at hometown two days ago”, “I eat yesterday,” instead of “I ate yesterday” and substituting the past participle for the past tense, for instance, “I see your mother yesterday” instead of the correct sentence “I saw your mother yesterday.”

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

### *4.1. Conclusion*

Based on the researcher findings it can be concluded that there is a meaningful relationship between students’ understanding of the past tense and their skill in writing about past events. In other words, a positive and significant correlation exists between these two aspects. The correlation coefficient calculated between their mastery of the past tense and their writing performance in recounting past actions is 0.497. This figure falls within the range of 0.4000 to 1.000. Furthermore, since this value exceeds the Pearson r critical value of 0.312 at a 5% significance level, the result confirms a statistically significant connection. The students in class XI IPA 1 at SMAN 20 Gowa demonstrated a generally low level of past tense mastery, with an average score of 4.6, classified as "poor." The mean score on the grammar test was 185.8. After assessing five components of writing, it was found that students in class XI IPA I at SMAN 20 Gowa reached an overall writing score of 6.8, which places them at a “fairly good” level in composing texts about past experiences.

### *4.2. Suggestions*

In light of the conclusions drawn from the study, the researcher proposes that Teachers are encouraged to place greater emphasis on teaching past tense forms, especially in practical contexts such as writing activities. Integrating grammar instruction with writing tasks can help students apply their knowledge more effectively. Creative methods and engaging exercises may also enhance students’ interest and retention. For students should actively practice using the past tense, both in spoken and written forms. Consistent exposure to various types of texts, such as narratives or personal recounts, may help them internalize grammatical structures. In addition, seeking

feedback on their writing can improve their ability to express past events more clearly and accurately. For Future Researcher It is recommended that future studies explore other factors that might influence students' writing performance, such as vocabulary range, motivation, or learning strategies. Conducting similar research with a larger and more diverse sample could also provide broader insights into the relationship between grammar mastery and writing ability and the last For Curriculum Developers The findings suggest a need to revisit the current grammar and writing curriculum. Aligning instructional content more closely with students' proficiency levels may foster better outcomes. Including more writing-focused grammar exercises, particularly those targeting past tense usage, could be beneficial.

## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, the researcher would like to express sincere gratitude to the Rector of Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar Dr. Abd Rakhim Nanda, S.T, M.T, IPU. for the continuous support, encouragement, and for providing a conducive academic environment throughout the research process. Deep appreciation is also extended to the Principal of SMAN 20 Gowa H. M. Sahrul, S.Pd., M.Pd. for granting permission to conduct the study at the school. The researcher is especially thankful to the dedicated teachers and administrative staff whose assistance and cooperation were invaluable during data collection. A heartfelt thank you goes to the students of Class XI IPA I at SMAN 20 Gowa, who participated enthusiastically and contributed meaningfully to the research through their time and effort. Lastly, the researcher wishes to acknowledge all individuals and institutions who, in one way or another, provided support, guidance, or encouragement throughout the completion of this study. Your contributions have been deeply appreciated and will always be remembered.

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