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FACULTY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION**

GRADUATION PAPER

**COMMON ERRORS
IN ENGLISH VERB TENSE SHIFT MADE BY
ENGLISH SPECIALIZING TENTH-GRADERS
AT THAI BINH SPECIALIZING HIGH SCHOOL**

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ACCEPTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Verb tense and tense shift play an important role in the mastery of English language. The aim of this research was to identify the common tense shift errors that the students make when doing verb tense exercises and the causes for those errors, some suggestions to minimize the errors were elicited as well. The participants included 65 English-specializing 10th-graders and their two English teachers at Thai Binh Specializing High School. The study adopted a mixed design with three data collection instruments which were tests, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to find the answers to the two research questions.

In answering the first research question about common errors found in students' exercises, the most surprisingly problematic tense was simple future, followed by perfect tenses. The shifting of simple present and past progressive tenses caused just few difficulties to the students. Besides, for all types of errors, students performed much better in the multiple choice than the simple completion tests. As for the second question about the causes for those errors, students' inappropriate learning strategies proved to be the most dominant one, which together with the ineffective teaching of some secondary school teachers, made it more likely that students would use verb tense shift incorrectly. The lack of study materials and the wide application of MC also had certain influence on the errors. It was also reported that Vietnamese and spoken language had little effect on students' incorrect use of verb shift. Based on those findings, the study also offered some ways to minimize the errors and suggestions for further research.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SC: simple completion

MC: multiple choice

TBSHS: Thai Binh Specializing High School

SG: student group

PART I: INTRODUCTION

1. Rationale for the study

Verb tense and tense shift play an important role in the mastery of English language. According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1972, p.40), in English, there is a close relationship between tense and our concept of time: “Time is a universal, non-linguistic concept with three divisions: past, present, and future; by *tense* we understand the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time”. Besides, Kane (1986) makes it clear that tense shift refers to time consistence in a sentence. Therefore when one wants to make statements, English tenses are important in organizing ideas and they are also useful in helping students understand a sentence or a passage, thus affect students’ mastery of the four skills: Listening, Writing, Speaking and Reading.

On considering the crucial role of tense shift to English learners, Kane (1986) has found that errors in verb tense shift are one of the four major errors in verb-tense usages. It is also important to note that, “errors not only reflect learners’ progress towards their language goals but also provide the researcher with evidence of strategies or procedures employed in language learning”, as perceived by Corder (cited in Delleman, 2008). Errors reflect ‘the interlanguage competence of the learner’ according to Brown (cited in Delleman, 2008). Moreover, according to Dulay, Brut and Krashen (1982), errors are important for the students’ progress in learning language. Therefore, unless a detailed analysis of each error type in tense shift is given, the causes for those errors are identified and effectively treated, the students will repeat those errors and cannot make correct English sentences, organize their ideas well or understand an English passage thoroughly.

In Viet Nam, there has been a very small number of lessons on English verb-tense usages for high school students. English specializing classes have from four to six 45-minute periods a week for English subject, depending on the rules of each school. As the students have learned about all the twelve verb tenses in secondary school, time for the revision of these tenses at high schools takes up less than 5% of the class time according to the current advanced course book English 10 released by Ministry of Education. Some specializing high schools even omit grammar revision to

spare time for the four basic skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, then the revision of verb tense shift is left for students' self-study or assigned as homework. This omission may be due to the belief that students majoring in English have learned enough about grammar in general and verb tense shift in particular at secondary school, so any revision or supplementary lesson is not necessary for them. However, from some teachers' reflection and observations of some students' written tests in TBSHS, the researcher has found that the students still have problems with verb shift, although each student's frequency of making errors is different.

Despite the existence of such tense shift errors made by high school students, there has hardly been any thorough study on the use of tense shift by 10th graders, especially those majoring in English. The available studies on English tenses conducted at high schools examined only each aspect of verb tense usages such as subject-verb concords, past tenses or present continuous tense. As a result, there has not been proper attention given to the errors of students in shifting tenses in various contexts, which is very important for the students at high-school level.

With the desire to fulfill the research gap in the theoretical field of verb shift errors made by students, the researcher carries out this research to figure out the frequency of each error types and the causes for them, so that some suggestions to minimize the errors can be elicited. Those goals are hoped to be achieved by the research project: **Common errors in English verb tense shifts made by English-specializing 10th- graders at Thai Binh Specializing High School.**

2. Objectives and research questions

This study is aimed at investigating the current situation of using tense shift by students specialized in English at TBSHS. To be more specific, its main purpose is to identify the common types of tense shift errors that these students make when doing verb tense exercises, as well as finding out the major factors which lead the students to make such errors.

To achieve those goals, the current study seeks answers to the following questions:

- 1) What are the common errors in tense shift that 10th graders majoring in English at Thai Binh Specializing High School make in their verb tense exercises?
- 2) What are the major causes for those errors as perceived by both the teachers and students?

3. Significance of the research

With this study, the researcher expects to gain insights into the frequency of errors in tense shifts that the students made and identify the causes for those errors as perceived by both the students and teachers, then some implications and suggestions for students' improvement are drawn as well. Once completed, the study would serve as a reference for 10th-form students, senior students, their teachers and even teachers at secondary schools - those who wish to beware of tense-shift or tense errors, overcome them and have a full mastery of verb tense shift in English in particular and English verb use in general. In addition, the findings are a primary resource for later researchers to design or improve programs or courses to improve the situation on a larger scale.

4. Scope of the study

This research looks at the common types of tense shift errors that students make when doing verb tense exercises, thus in the written grammar test, the primary concern of the researcher is the error types, not the test scores. The participants are 65 tenth-graders in two English-specializing class settings and their two teachers at TBSHS. Although the findings of this study could not be generalized to a large population, it offered a detailed analysis into students' errors and causes for them, so the study might well serve as a good reference for learners, teachers of English and other researchers.

5. Organization

The rest of the paper includes two main parts:

Part II: Development: consists of three chapters:

Chapter 1: Literature Review: provides the definitions of key terms and theoretical framework, which covers the analysis of verb tenses in Vietnamese and in English, ways of categorizing verb shift errors and causes of errors.

Chapter 2: Methodology: gives information about the setting of the study, the mixed design with three the data collection instruments and two data analysis methods.

Chapter 3: Results and discussion: presents, analyzes, and discusses the findings obtained from the tests, survey questionnaires and interviews. Also, some implications based on the findings are given.

Part III: Conclusion: summarizes the main points discussed in this research. It also mentions the limitations of the study and includes recommendations and suggestions for further studies. Following this part are the References and Appendices.

PART II: DEVELOPMENT

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Two main parts of background knowledge for the research in this chapter are definitions of key terms and theoretical framework, which focuses on the analysis of verb tenses in Vietnamese and English, tense shift in English, categorization and causes for tense shift errors.

1.1. Definitions of key terms

1.1.1. Mistake versus error

There are different definitions for the two terms “mistake” and “error”. While many linguists consider the two terms to be inclusive or interchangeable, others argue that there is a clear distinction between them.

Firstly, in the opinion of Kane (1983), the large section “Common errors with verbs” covers such sub-categories as mistakes in verb form and mistakes in base tense, so it is seen that “error” has a larger scope than “mistake”, although basically they refer to the same incorrectness. Sometimes the two terms are even interchangeable. In contrast, Rebat (2008) considers “mistake” a cover term of “error”. While learners make mistakes at both performance and competence levels, errors refer to the incorrectness in competence only.

In applied linguistics theory (Ur 1996, pp. 85-87), there is a clear distinction between errors (consistent, based on a mis-learned generalization) and mistakes (occasional, inconsistent slips). It is necessary that grammar mistakes be corrected, and learners should pay attention to them in order to make progress.

Corder (1981) distinguishes mistakes and errors by their self-correctibility criterion. While a mistake can be self-corrected, an error cannot because it is systematic. An error is likely to occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learners, so only the teachers and researchers can locate them.

Obviously there are different distinctions of “mistake” and “error”, however, whether the two terms are inclusive or not, students cannot correct errors because they are systematic and are related to students’ competence in language using. In this study, as the researcher would like to investigate the systematically wrong ways in students’

use of verb tense shift, which means that the students themselves fail to correct their own incorrectness, “error” is regarded as the more appropriate term.

1.1.2. Verb tense

“Tense is the grammatical expression of the location of events in time. It anchors an event to the speaker’s experience of the world by relating the **event time** to a point of reference.”

(Downing, p.352)

Quirk and Greenbaum (1972) makes it clear that time is a universal, non-linguistic concept with three divisions namely past, present and future. By tense we understand the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time.

To make it simpler, Sinclair et al. (1990) defines tense as the relationship between the form of a verb and the time to which it refers and Greenbaum (1996) considers tense a grammatical category referring to a time of a situation.

1.2. Theoretical framework

1.2.1. Verb tenses in Vietnamese

Nguyen (2010) makes it clear in his article on time perception in Vietnamese that almost all the studies about Vietnamese grammar up to now has referred to tense with two opposite opinions about whether Vietnamese has tense or not. In fact, the distinction between tense and aspect in Vietnamese is controversial as compared to the case in English.

Some linguists argue that “Vietnamese has two tenses, past and future (marked by *đã* [past] and *sẽ* [future], and two aspects, perfect and progressive (marked by *đã* [perfect] and *đang* [progressive])” (Panfilov 2002 cited in Dan (n.d.)). On the other hand, discussing the existence of verb tenses in Vietnamese, LeeRit team, a keen group in teaching Vietnamese to foreigners, agree that major verb tenses in Vietnamese are the present simple, present continuous, past simple and future simple tenses. So it can be concluded that the tenses in Vietnamese are not as complicated as in English.

In contrast, Nguyen (1977), Nguyen (2010) and other Vietnamese linguists state that it is not necessary to attach Vietnamese verbs to certain grammatical categories

because Vietnamese verbs are not inflectional and they are not used to denote different grammatical categories. Furthermore, some grammatical categories such as tense and aspect are not typical of Vietnamese verbs. In addition, Cao (cited in Dan (n.d.)), an expert in Vietnamese grammar research, also gives sound explanation on the misunderstanding about the existence of tense in Vietnamese. Unlike the authors who agree that the markers *đã* and *sẽ* signal past and future tenses, Cao (1998) asserts that Vietnamese only has aspects, not tenses, *đã* marks the perfect aspect and *sẽ* is used to express an uncertain state, and share the same opinion as Panfilov (2002) that *đang* mark progressive aspect. Cao (1998) also gives examples in which the markers *đã* and *đang* do not properly indicate *past* and *present* tenses. In the example “*Nếu hai tháng nữa anh mới dọn đến thì tôi đã ở chỗ khác rồi*”, *đã* expresses action happening in the future. Other examples are “*Hồi ấy tôi đang học đệ tú, còn anh đang chuẩn bị thi tú tài*” (action happening in the past) or “*Sáng mai anh nên đến sớm khi cả nhà tôi đang ngủ*” (action happening in the future). Therefore, the assumption that Vietnamese has two tenses which are past and future marked by *đã* [past] and *sẽ* [future] may easily cause confusion.

In addition, although time is not directly expressed in Vietnamese language, it is understood from the context or because time expressions are used (such as: “*hôm nay*”- now, “*hôm qua*” - yesterday, “*ngày mai*” - tomorrow, “*năm tới*”- next year, etc.). According to LeeRit team, the past continuous tense is presented through the present continuous in specific contexts or with time expression. Besides, the past perfect is not expressed through verb tense, but the use of relative time indicators such as *before* and *after*. Dan (n.d.) points out several ideas on Vietnamese tense in his preliminary study “Some Vietnamese Students’ Problems with English Grammar”. He states that “In Vietnamese, verbs are not conjugated, and tense and aspect are generally understood in the context” (p.6). Similarly, Le (1972) and Dam (2001) claim that tense and aspect are usually implied and understood in context, even though Vietnamese has particles to mark them when needed. For example, the Vietnamese sentence *Anh ấy ngủ* can be translated into English as *He is sleeping*, *He slept*, *He sleeps*, or *He has slept*, depending on the context. When adverbial elements such as *trước đây* [ago, before] or *bây giờ* [now, at the moment] are used in the sentence, tense – and/ or aspect-marking particles are generally omitted.

In a nutshell, different opinions show that tenses in Vietnamese are not as complicated as those in English and it can even be considered that there are no tenses in Vietnamese because time can be understood through aspect markers, contexts or time expressions.

1.2.2. Verb tenses in English

It is also important to restate that a tense indicates the time when an action occurs, that is present, past or future. During the 1990s backwards, tenses were quite complicated because of the verb inflection for person, tense, aspect, and mood. According to Greenbaum (1996), in English, there are two tense categories indicated by the form of the verb: present and past, this is because tense is realized in English morphologically on the verb. Greenbaum's opinion is agreed by Downing (1992) and Biber et al. (2007), and further explained that the tense distinction is made on the first or only verb in the verb phrase:

Present: *speaks, is speaking, has been speaking*

Past: *spoke, was speaking, had been speaking*

We also use auxiliaries for distinctions in time, for example, *will* and *be going* to refer to future time, as Downing (1992) says that English has no verbal inflection to mark a future tense. Past and present events are considered to reflect real events, while references to the future are related to unreal events. Therefore, "from a structural point of view, English verbs are inflected for only two tenses: present and past." (Biber et al. 2007)

Other authors share another more popular opinion about the tense system in English now that there are nine or twelve tenses in total.

Nine tenses in English include three present tenses (present simple, present perfect, present progressive), three past tenses and three future tenses. Smith (2009) explains that actions happening at the time of speaking are in present tense, those preceding the speaking time are in past tense, and actions after the time of speaking are in the future tense. Besides, three aspects that are simple, progressive and perfect tell us whether an action is ongoing, completed, or a state is being referred to. The combination of tense and aspect in English creates what are often called "compound tenses." Similarly, author Lester (2009) regards aspect as a category, the English tense

system can be understood by sub-categories of verbs by time (present, past, and future) and by category (simple, perfect, and progressive).

In other authors' opinions, besides the above nine tenses, the three other tenses are present perfect progressive, past perfect progressive and future perfect progressive.

English verb tenses fall into three general time frames—past, present and future. Within each of these time frames are four fundamental types of verb tenses, distinguished by both structure and function. These are the simple tenses, progressive tenses, perfect tenses and perfect progressive tenses.

(Leimkuhler, 2010)

Leimkuhler agrees with many well-known authors whose books or articles has been published such as Swan (1995) in “Basic English Usage”, Alexander (1998) in “Longman English Grammar Practice”, Eastwood (2002) in “Oxford Practice Grammar”. According to these authors, while the present perfect tense focus on the completeness of the action, the present perfect progressive is used to emphasize the process of doing something, the similar emphasis is seen with the future, past perfect and perfect progressive. As the clearer time distinction in a sentence is helpful in clarifying the meaning of the sentence and shows better competence of learners in using English, the twelve-tense system should be more helpful than a nine-tense system in the study.

As compared to the two-tense categorization pointed out by Downing (1992) and Greenbaum (1996), the verb tense concept in Modern English is relatively simpler and more popular among many teachers and students. In order for the students to identify the tenses easily, and it is also easier for the researcher to get the most reliable results from the test and questionnaire, the categorization of twelve tenses in English is employed, especially well serving the categorization of tense shift errors in this study.

1.2.3. Comparison between Vietnamese and English verb forms

Generally speaking, although the verbs in both languages are used in different contexts with specific time indicators such as “hôm nay” (today), “ngày mai” (tomorrow), “hôm qua” (yesterday) etc., verb usages in Vietnamese are generally much simpler than their counterparts in English.

Kane's point is agreed by Gear (2006) with examples and analysis of tense shift. So a verb tense shift occurs when verb tense is changed in the same sentence or in following sentences.

On the other hand, according to Berry (1991, pp. 61-63), tense shifting means "inconsistency of using tense in a compound or complex sentence". In other words, an English learner must be careful to maintain consistencies in the use of tense, when the sentence starts with a certain time and situation (tense), he or she must not make an error in meaning by shifting tenses. Berry also gives two types of shifting tense:

- 1) Shifting in tense sequence: when the users use two different tenses in a compound and complex sentence sequence. For example: They came late and go direct to the hall.
- 2) Tense Substitution: when the users use another tense pattern instead of the suitable tense pattern (appropriate with time markers and situations). For instance, in the example "yesterday I has a party in my house", the user uses present simple tense instead of the simple past.

(Berry 1991, p.62)

The ways Kane and Berry define tense shift are totally different. Although both authors use the extensional definition, in which the referential relation between words and its referent is indicated (Hurley 2011, p.102), Kane pointed out the relation between tense shift and time consistence while Berry related tense shift to time inconsistency. On one hand, despite Berry's categorization, the researcher finds that sometimes there is not a clear-cut border between shifting in tense sequence and tense substitution. For instance, in the compound sentence "yesterday I has party in my house and I invited a lot of friends", two different tenses are used (tense sequence) and present simple is given instead of past simple tense (tense shift). On the other hand, Kane's definition is much clearer and easier to understand, thus it enables the researcher to gain a more reliable set of responses related to different types of tense shift errors from the teachers and the students. Therefore, to serve the purpose of this study, the term "tense shift" is understood according to Kane's definition.

1.2.5. Ways of categorizing errors in tense shift

As far as the researcher has investigated, there are two ways to categorize tense shift errors.

For the first trend, many popular publications of well-known linguists in the world examine English tense shift errors in different systems of verb-related errors such as errors in tense base, tense shift and tense sequence (Kane 1986) or errors in person, tense, number or voice. Regardless of the error system that tense shift belongs to, the errors are illustrated by examples of present and past tenses, and occasionally by future tense, with no clear error categorization, which can be inferred that those authors base on the available distinction of twelve tenses in English to point out the errors.

Kane (1986) reports that students have difficulty with the appropriate tense shift of the past perfect – that is when referring to a past within a past.

In the following example, the reference to the “Colonies” (the United States before 1783) makes it clear that the writer is alluding in the second sentence to a more remote past than he designates in the first sentence; therefore the past perfect is called for:

In nineteenth-century America, colleges were far less numerous. Colleges × began [SHOULD BE *had begun*] in the Colonies as religious schools.

(p.686)

The second trend reflects the analysis of Berry (1991). According to this author, two types of tense shift errors are shifting in tense sequence and tense substitution, which has been mentioned in the definition of tense shift in the previous part.

At this point, it is worth restating that Kane’s ideas on tense shift cause less confusion to language learners. Besides as most teachers and students are familiar with the twelve tenses in English, categorizing tense shift errors into twelve types accordingly makes it easier for the participants in this study to recognize, thus reliable results can be gained. Therefore, in this study, there are twelve error categorizations equivalent with twelve verb tenses in English.

1.2.6. Causes of tense shift errors

It is very important to identify the causes for written errors in general and errors in tense shifts in particular, which is helpful in finding the appropriate solutions to those errors. So far a lot of attention has been paid to those causes which include (1) first language interference, (2) lack of good teaching methods or materials for the students,

(3) inadequate second language learning strategies and (4) incorrect language use. The four main causes are agreed by such typical authors as Selinker (1974), Broughton et al. (2002), although the sub-categories of those causes are slightly different.

First language or mother tongue interference is often the first factor that causes the errors due to the fact that tenses in Vietnamese (first language or mother tongue) and English (second language) are different. People usually translate word by word from the first language and try to fit them into the second language.

“L2 learners are used to their mother tongue, when contacting a new language they will turn to the help of L1. The difference between L1 and L2, as well as the interferences of L1 will produce bad effect which is called negative transfer of mother tongue. Negative transfer refers to cross-linguistic influences resulting in errors, over production, underproduction, miscomprehension, and other effects. Those results will become stumbling stocks in the process of learning L2.” (Zhiliang 2011, p.1062)

In addition, two other important factors are inappropriate teaching methods and lack of materials for the students. By teaching methods, many linguists emphasize the overall plans for teaching and learning based on a selected approach (Richards and Rodgers cited in To and Nguyen 2012). Teaching methods also involve the roles assigned to teachers, learners and instructional materials. Besides, the materials cover both instructional materials and self-study or supplementary materials that students can be exposed to.

Thirdly, inadequate second language learning strategies leads to students’ error making because they do not know how to study effectively. Learning strategies are defined as the operations used by the learner to aid his/ her learning (Oxford 1990, p. ix). According to Oxford (1990), there are six learning strategies namely meta-cognitive, affective, cognitive, social, mnemonic and compensation strategies. Details about those strategies are shown in the table below:

Meta-cognitive	Affective	Cognitive	Social	Mnemonic	Compensation
Learning styles, plan,	Keep language learning	Analyse, reason, take systematic notes, guess from	Ask questions, cooperate with others,	Learn vocab/grammar rules by sounds,	Guess, use synonym, gesture

monitor, evaluate	diary, emotional checklists	docontext reorganize information	empathise with others	locus technique, body movement	
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Table 1.1: Learning strategies

To each learner, some strategies are more effective than others, thus finding the suitable strategies for learners can make both teaching and learning more effective.

The last cause for tense shift error is incorrect language using. According to Thomas (2011), for the complicated nature of English tense system, errors can be caused by overgeneralization, ignorance of the rules restriction, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized or bad models.

Besides those four causes, the researcher also wants to see if the types of exercises (simple completion and multiple choice) have influence on students' errors. Details about these testing instruments are provided in the next chapter.

There are also many other factors that lead to students' incorrectness when using tense shift such as carelessness, tiredness or lack of concentration, which are factors external to the competence of the speaker according to Corder (cited in Delleman, 2008). James (1998) regards such mistakes as 'slips' and adds that they are quickly and easily self-correctable. As this study aims at finding only the errors in tense shift as perceived by both teachers and students, the causes for the above-mentioned mistakes were not investigated.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the researcher analyzes the setting of the study, research design, sampling, data collection and data analysis.

2.1. The setting of the study

2.1.1. Scope of the study

The primary concern of this study is errors in verb tense shift that 10th-form English Specializing students at TBSHS in school year 2012- 2013 meet and causes for those errors.

2.1.2. Participants

In this study, two groups selected to be the participants in this study were 10th-form English Specializing students and their teachers at TBSHS in school year 2012-2013.

The first group - 10th-graders studying English as their major foreign language were the ‘target population’ of the study. According to the program of secondary and high schools, English had been their compulsory subject at school for at least five years, which means that they have been officially taught English grammar in general, and English verb tenses in particular in a relatively systematic way during that time.

65 students currently in two English-major classes joined this study. The table below gives the information about the students:

Number of students	65
Places of Study	Two classes at TBSHS
English language program currently studying	Advanced Course book of the Ministry of Education and Training.

Table 2.1: Student participants in the study

The second group includes two teachers, who were teaching English subject in the two given classes. The teachers have had over twenty years of teaching English so they were experienced enough to be able to provide some helpful information for the study.

2.2. Research design

The study was a mixed design with three data collection methods, which were testing, survey and interview.

2.3. Sampling

The chosen sampling method was **purposive sampling**, a type of non-probability sampling technique. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), the samples in purposive sampling have particular characteristics. In this study, all the samples were students whose majors were English, not other subjects, and all these learners had already learned about verb tense shift before. Besides, the researcher used two types of purposive sampling, which were total population sampling and critical case sampling in two different stages of the data collection procedure. Firstly, **total population sampling technique** was used to examine the performance in the test and the reflection in the survey of the entire population, which means 65 tenth-graders. They were the only 10th graders attending two English specializing classes at TBSHS in Thai Binh province. After this stage, the researcher selected 12 participants who performed particularly well in the multiple choice or simple completion tests, or had some critical comments in the survey. As **critical case sampling** serves well in exploratory qualitative research and research where a small number of cases can be crucial in explaining the phenomenon (Patton, 2002), the 12 students chosen for the interview were critical cases that provided in-depth analysis of the causes and ways to avoid errors in verb tense shift.

2.4. Data collection instruments

The methods used were testing, survey and interview, therefore, the researcher applied three instruments which were test, questionnaire and semi-structured interview. After the results from the tests and questionnaires had been collected, the researcher carried out the interviews with teachers and students to gain insight into the answers to both research questions.

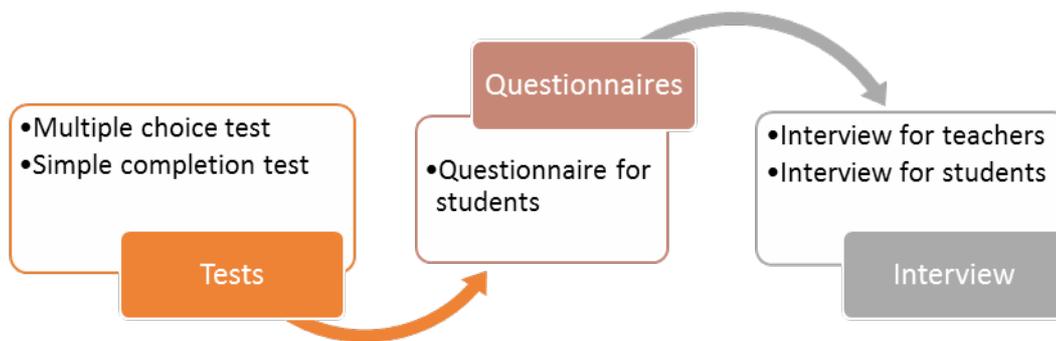


Figure 2.1: Data collection method

2.4.1. Test

Ur (1996, p.33) in “A Course in language teaching” states that “A test may be defined as an activity whose main purpose is to convey (usually to the testees) how well the testees know and can do something”. Heaton (1988) claims testing is very important in checking what students can do with the language learned, he also points out that tests enable the teachers to identify difficulties faced by students and the effectiveness of teaching methods and materials, all of which make the learning process more efficient. In addition, Madsen (1983) states that the diagnostic characteristics of tests help foster learning as “they confirm what each person has mastered, and they point up those language items needing further attention” (p.4). Therefore a test is a useful means to evaluate students’ knowledge and skills in language. In this study, tests were the first instruments to evaluate the use of tense shift among students and then identify the error types that they encountered, which served to answer the first research question.

Diagnostic tests were employed in this study as an effective instrument to evaluate students’ strengths and weaknesses in using verb shift. According to To and Nguyen (2011), this test type helps teachers diagnose the language problems students have and to plan what to teach in the future. It is also important to notice that diagnostic tests often lend themselves well to diagnostic purposes, so it’s the shortcomings of the students that were the objective of the tests in this study, the test results or marks were not important.

Among many different approaches to testing grammar, the researcher chose to use simple completion and multiple choice completion to find out the students' strengths and weaknesses in verb shift.

Simple completion (SC) test proved to be relevant in this study for their advantages. It enabled the researcher to measure productive skills because the tense in English allowed for flexibility. Madsen (1983) considers this test type an ideal and quick way to check the mastery of a few specific points for only one or two classes of students. In more detail, Hughes (1990) says that completion test proves to be sufficient for most grammar testing purposes as they require students to supply grammatical structures appropriately and not simply to recognize their correct use. Moreover, this technique can be used to test a variety of structures, which is relevant to this study as the researcher would like to investigate the verb shift errors in the twelve English verb tenses. Last but not least, one advantage of this test type over true-false or multiple-choice test is the minimization of guessing.

The choice of multiple choice (MC) questions in this study, one of the most widely-used types in objective test, was justified by three main reasons pointed out by Madsen (1983). Firstly, students were not enabled to avoid the grammar point being evaluated as the choices were given. Secondly, the scoring could be quick and reliable because the students' task was to tick one appropriate answer in a given time period while it was possible to have more items than would otherwise be possible. In addition, MC questions could prove to be a useful means of testing not students' productivity but measuring their achievement or their abilities to recognize correct grammatical forms, then diagnose their specific problems. Last but not least, as regards current situations, most of the students considered English an important subject for their entrance exam to the university, in which all the testing items were in MC form, so they had been familiar to these questions.

On the other hand, there is a great chance that students just guessed the correct answers without fully understanding their choices, or the choices themselves were the cues for the students. So in this study, the researcher could compare the results from MC and SC exercises on tense shift, then the differences between the two test types were clarified in the interviews, which was very useful for the researcher to draw some implications and suggestions. Besides, there was a possibility that the responses

for the MC exercises were so simple that it was easy for students to copy the answer from their peers, thus the researcher reminded students to take the test seriously and monitored the data collection procedure carefully to minimize this disadvantage. Another problem was that it was very difficult for the researcher to write successful items because of much preparation time and the unavailability of distractors. To overcome this drawback, the researcher based most of the MC test on a pre-research on verb tenses, and adapted some MC questions to well serve the purposes of this study. All questions in the MC test had to follow the following principles:

- Each MC item was clear and had only one answer
- Only one feature was tested at a time
- All MC items were at an appropriate level for the students

Description of the test:

The test consisted of two exercises: one was the simple completion and the other has all MC questions, so that the researcher could make comparison between the two test types in terms of their effects on students' competence in using verb tense shift.

All the items in the simple completion test covered inflection form. Students were required to give the correct form of the verb "sleep" in one story, in which all the twelve tenses in English were included, so the tense shift between past, present and future events was tested. The whole story "It's Sleepy time, Nighty Night, Sis" by Jennings (n.d.), an experienced English teacher, was among the rare materials that included all the twelve tenses in it. The story used simple language so it was appropriate to the students participating in the study.

In the multiple-choice practice test, the items were adapted from a study on teaching and learning English verb tenses by Wang (2012). There were 48 items in total, some simple-sentence items were edited to become compound or complex ones to serve the purpose of the study. Besides, some others that were too long or containing complicated words were also modified to ensure that there were minimum number of new words and students fully understood the given context. On the other hand, some items that had confusing or incorrect answers were replaced by more suitable materials for students at intermediate level. Details for error distribution were

included in Appendix I. The tests were piloted to 5 students for some minor corrections before the real data collection procedure took place.

Procedure to collect data from the test

In order to carry out the test, the researcher went through three steps. Firstly, **an appointment** with both the teacher and students were arranged at the suitable time at TBSHS. During the appointment, the researcher indicated the topic as well as the significance of the study and the reason why she needed their support. A friendly and polite attitude together with clear statements was helpful in winning their sympathy. Next, on the **official test day**, the students had 60 minutes to finish the tests themselves. Finally, after finishing the collection procedure in each class, **a report** about the achievements and shortcomings of the process was made for further improvements next time.

2.4.2. Questionnaire

Oppenheim (1992) defines questionnaire as an important measurement instrument in research to serve the aims of the overall research plan and objectives.

Brown (2001) assumes that questionnaire has a broader sense “Questionnaires are any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers.” (Brown cited in Dornyei 2003)

Survey questionnaire method was employed to collect data because of its suitability and convenience. As Makey and Gass (2005) refer to questionnaire as among the most common methods of collecting data on attitudes and opinions from a large group of participants, and it allows researchers to gather information about learners’ self-report. Dornyei (2003) shares the same ideas and he explains that this method has such outstanding features as “easy to construct, extremely versatile, and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable”. Besides, questionnaire could save the researchers a good amount of time and effort. By distributing a questionnaire to a group of people, the researchers could collect a great amount of information in a much shorter time comparing to conducting a face-to-face interview with the same number of participants. (Gillham cited in Dornyei 2003, p.9). Therefore, in this study, questionnaire was used because

the researcher wanted to collect the students' self-evaluation on their tense shift use and the causes for their errors, which served to answer the second research question.

Design of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was self – designed by the researcher with ten questions. The first two questions were to identify the frequency of making errors in tense shift as perceived by students. Question three explored the error causes and some spaces were intentionally left blank so that students were able to explain those causes in more details. The choices for each item in question two and three were based on Likert scale. The next six questions helped the researcher to figure out the effectiveness of teachers' instruction, theory and practice lessons. These questions, along with the interview questions served to report real learning situations of students, then some implications could be drawn about causes for their errors. And the last question elicited ways to minimize those error for implications and suggestions of the study.

As the students had never done this kind of survey before, the researcher translated all the questions into Vietnamese and gave them detailed instructions on how to complete the questionnaires to get their most reliable responses.

Procedure to collect data from the questionnaire

The procedure to collect data from the questionnaire went through three steps. Firstly, **questionnaires were copied and delivered** to the respondents for self-reflection after they had just finished the tests. Then comes **the monitoring process**, in which instructions on the ways of completing the questionnaire and explanation to confusing words or difficulties were provided. In case there were few unenthusiastic students, the researcher encouraged him or her to finish the questionnaire on time by asking if they had any difficulty and urged them to finish the questionnaire. Finally, after finishing the collection procedure in each class, **a report** about the achievement and shortcomings of the process was made for further improvements next time.

2.4.3. Semi-structured interview as a data collection instrument

Semi-structured interview is associated with its convenience, it is not standardized questions but theme, topic and areas are covered. According to Case (1990), semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to have flexibility in the conversation or two-way communication. Basing on the proposed open framework,

the interviewer can make more general questions during the interview. With the same idea, Harrell and Bradley (2009) share the same idea that semi-structured interview helps the researchers to understand thoroughly the answers provided by interviewees. In general, a semi-structured interview is flexible with no arranged set of questions.

Using semi-structured interview enables the researcher to obtain information and gain insights into what is being explored. In this study, the researcher was able to discover the frequency of different errors in verb tenses and the factors leading to those errors as perceived by the teachers and students. In the semi-structured interview, the questions were adaptable so the researcher was able to change questions or ask questions back. The order of the questions could be changed in order to get more information from the interviewees. Besides, the researchers based on their responses to ask further related questions to gain insight into the error causes. Thus during the semi-structured interviews, both the researcher and the interviewees decided the directions of the interview with more freedom and activeness. The recording of the interview was useful for later detailed analysis.

In this study, in order to gain the most reliable responses from the interviewees, the researchers used both one-to-one interview (for teachers) and group interview (for students). On one hand, as each teacher had her own assumption and teaching methods, the researcher would like her to share opinions and experience in a comfortable way, avoiding the possible conflicts when being interviewed with her colleague, so one-to-one interview proved to be suitable for teachers. On the other hand, the researcher used group interview for “synergy of the group interaction” (Green et al. cited in Rabiee 2004) that this method offered. As the students had never attended such an interview before, each group of chosen students were chosen from the same class and they had known each other quite well. Moreover, “for some individuals, self-disclosure is natural and comfortable, while for others it requires trust and effort” (Krueger & Casey cited in Rabiee 2004). So putting the students from two classes into two interview groups could make it easier for them to raise their opinions as well as supporting the ideas of their peers.

The following section provides information on **design of interview questions for students and teachers**. The instruments were constructed based on the research

questions. As the researchers used semi-structured interviews, most of the questions were open-ended.

In the interviews for two groups of students, the list of interview questions could be divided into three main parts. The first part, including one question aiming at the information about lessons in verb tense shifts for students. The next two questions were to investigate the reasons why students made such errors and the very last part was for some suggestions given by the students to overcome those errors. As the students' opinions on their errors in the twelve verb tenses had been given in the survey, they were not included in these interviews.

The interviews for two teachers were quite similar to those for the students. But teachers' opinions on the most or least problematic verb tense shifts should be examined, then the researcher was able to make comparison between students' real performance in the test, their reflection in the survey and teachers' assumption in the interview, so one question about types of verb tense shift errors was asked to the teachers. Besides, the last part of the interview was suggestions for students to overcome those errors given by the teachers.

Procedure to collect data from interview

The interviews for teachers took place before the ones for students. Each procedure required three steps for data collection. Firstly, the researcher **contacted** the students or two teachers to make sure they were available for the interview, agreeing on time and place. One teacher was interviewed at her house, the other at the school and both places were very quiet and comfortable for the interview. Then comes the most important step in which the researcher **interviewed** the teachers, students and the interviews were recorded. Both teachers and students were very kind and supportive during the interview, although SG B seemed a bit shy and the interviewer had to add more questions to elicit their responses. Lastly, after having interviewed the students and teachers, the recordings were **transcribed** for data, which were ready to be analyzed.

2.5. Data analysis

Quantitative Analysis Strategies – for instruments: Test and Questionnaire

Mackey and Gass (2005) explained that in quantitative analysis, measures of frequency indicate how often a particular behavior or phenomenon occurs, the statistics from the analysis of 65 students' tests and 65 questionnaires were expressed in numerical form. In detail, each type of error was represented by four items in the MC exercise and one items in the SC, so the number of wrong items for each type were counted and recorded, then the researcher was able to obtain the frequency of different errors.

In the data analysis procedure for the test, the first step was **preparing the data** when the completeness of the tests was checked. Then the researcher **reported the statistics** by gathering data from distribution to show the percentage of each type of error in comparison with others. Finally, **collected data were visualized** by bar or pie charts.

As regards the questionnaire, the researcher **prepared the data** by checking the completeness of the questionnaire, the consistence of each question and given answer, the understandability as well as the validity of the answers. After that, the **statistics was reported** by gathering data from the distribution for the percentage of each type of error in comparison with others, the response for causes of errors and ways to minimize them. Finally, **collected data were visualized** by bar or pie charts or graphs.

In other words, findings from the test were analyzed to answer the research question: What are the common errors in tense shift that 10th graders make? After that, the questionnaires were analyzed to double check the frequency of errors and find out the causes for those errors as perceived by students, which served to answer the second research question.

Qualitative Analysis Strategies – Instrument: Further explanation for the choices in the Survey and Semi-structured Interview

Qualitative analysis proved to be an effective data analysis method for the researcher to compare the findings from the interviews with the results shown in the tests and questionnaires as well as understanding more deeply about the causes for those errors and ways to minimize them. The method is “any qualitative data reduction and sense – making effort that takes a volume of quantitative materials and

attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton 2001). While quantitative method reports the statistical significant occurrence of particular texts, qualitative analysis illustrates the range of meanings of the phenomenon. Comparing the interview results with the findings from the other instruments enabled the researchers to reduce the unreliability of these tools and gain insights into the findings of the study.

When analyzing the data from the interview, the first step was to **transcribe all forms of data** (recorded form and note-taking form) which were recorded during the interviews with the two teachers. After all the data were transcribed, **the data** that the researcher supposed to be relevant, effective and supportive in answering the research questions **were selected**, this step was to connect the theory in the literature review and the results from other instruments with appropriate information in the interviews. Once the data became selective and direct, the researchers chose qualitative method to **analyze the data** based on the research questions and the purposes of the study. In this step, the analyzed data were generalized and theorized into findings and grounded theory. Finally, **the findings of the research were reported** so that some discussion and implications can be made.

Besides dealing with the first questions, the interview results and further report of students in the survey were helpful in answering the other important research question which was just partly explained by the quantitative analysis: “What are the major causes for the errors as perceived by both teachers and students?”

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, major findings from the simple completion test, multiple choice test, survey and interview are reported and analyzed, then discussion and implications from those results are given by the researcher.

3.1. Major findings, discussion and implications of research question 1:

What are the common errors in tense shift that 10th graders majoring in English at Thai Binh Specializing High School make in their verb tense exercises?

3.1.1. Major findings

The data used to answer the given research question were gathered through three instruments: tests, questionnaire for students and teacher interviews.

Results from the SC and MC tests

There are 48 MC items and 12 SC ones, thus the test has 60 items in total. Results from SC and MC tests done by 65 students are illustrated below.

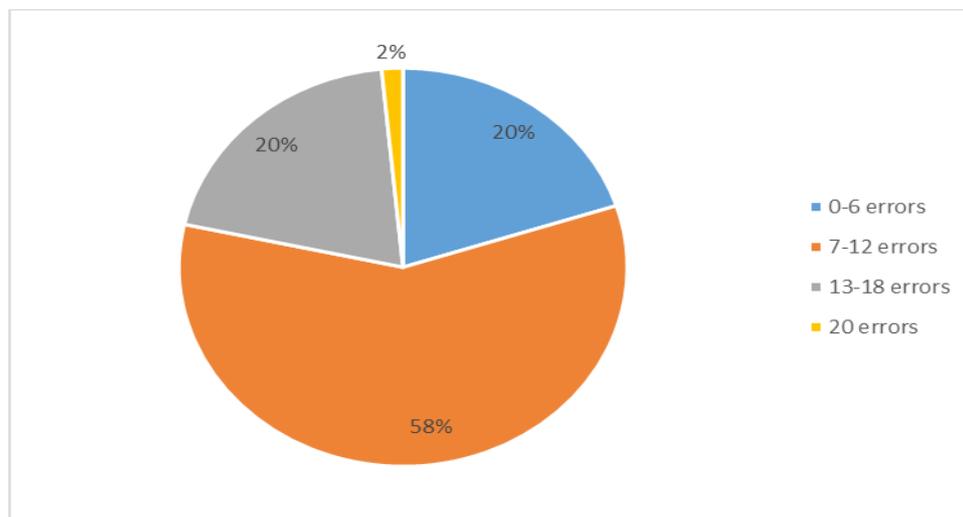


Figure 3.1: Proportion of errors out of 60 items that students had in both tests

In the test, the final number of errors that students made was not high. 13 out of 65 students (20%) committed less than 10% of all the errors. The majority of the test takers failed to give the correct verb forms of 7 to 12 items in the test while a small number of participants made more than 12 out of 60 errors.

On one hand, the numbers of the errors in the SC exercise were high, ranging from 0 to 9 errors out of 12 as shown in the following graph:

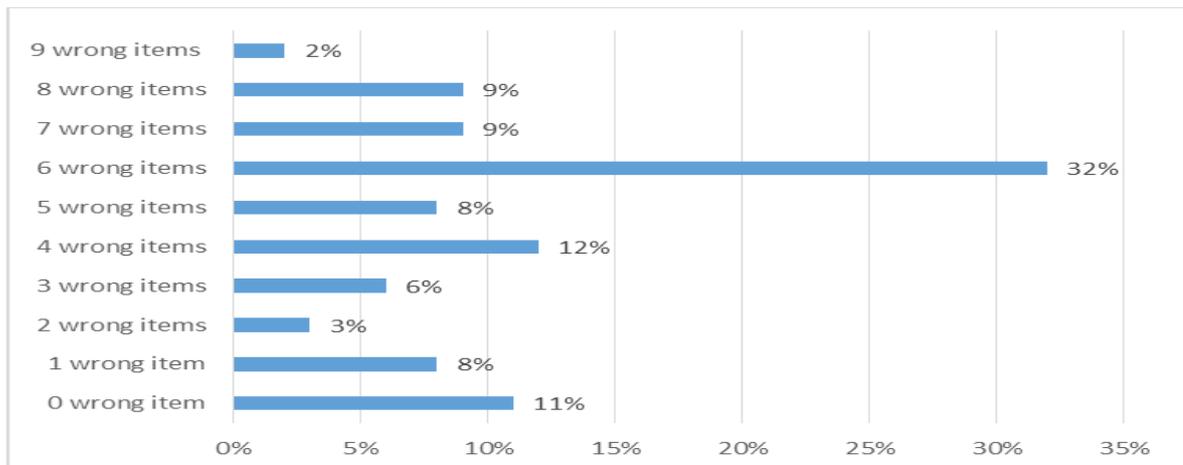
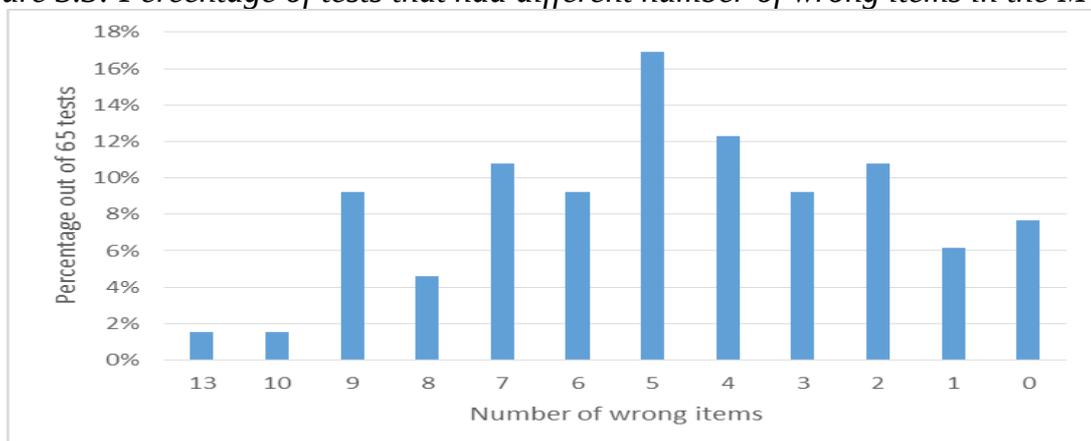


Figure 3.2: The percentage of tests with wrong items in the SC

As can be seen from figure 3.2, the number of tests with wrong answers varied greatly. Only 7 forms (11% of the tests collected) were finished perfectly with no errors. One third of the students completed 6 out of 12 blanks correctly. Among 15 students giving wrong answers to more than half of twelve tested tenses, one student committed 9 errors, the largest number of errors in the test.

Figure 3.3: Percentage of tests that had different number of wrong items in the MC



On the other hand, details for the score range are shown in figure 3.3. As shown in the graph, in general, the number of the errors in the MC test was low, ranging from 0 to 13 out of 48 errors. 5 students (8%) who best performed in the test did not make any errors. More than half of the students made fewer than 5 errors out of 48, thus only one third of 65 students had from 5 to 10 errors in their exercises. On the other hand, only two students committed more than 10 errors in the test.

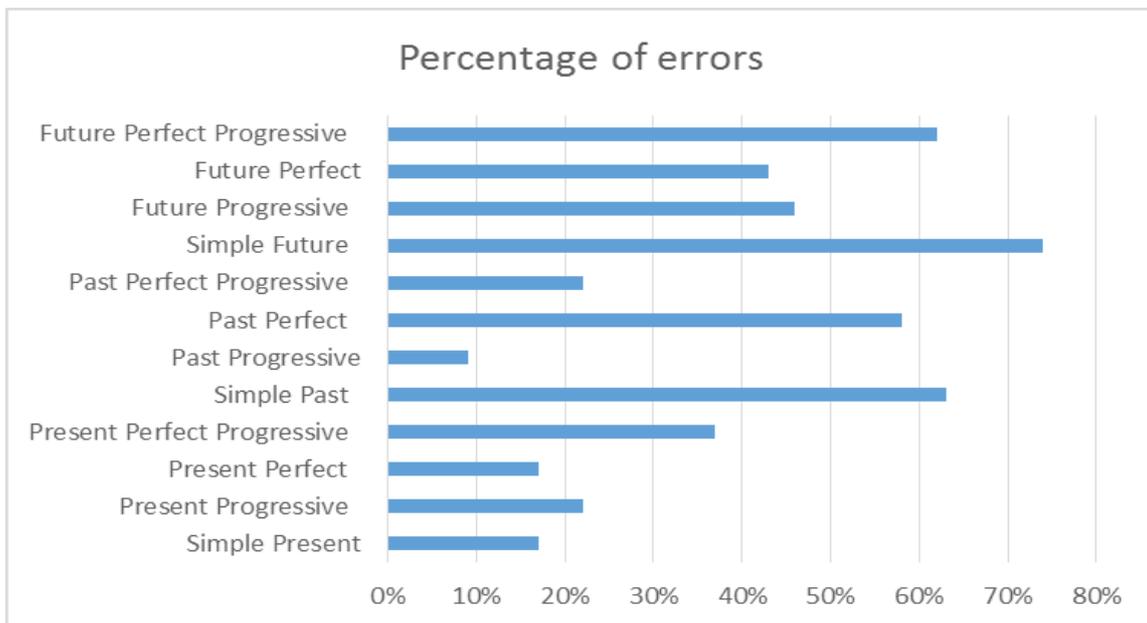


Figure 3.4: Percentage of the twelve error types in the simple completion test

The chart above presents the percentage of tense shift errors categorized according to twelve tenses in English. As can be seen from the chart, 74% of the students did not give the correct forms of simple future tense, which took up the largest proportion of all the twelve types. Future perfect progressive, simple past and past perfect tenses ranked the second with about 60% of the students using incorrectly. About 40% of the students gave the incorrect forms of future perfect, future progressive and present perfect progressive tenses. The other five tenses caused fewer problems to the students. Only 6 tests (9%) showed students' confusion in using past progressive tense.

Figure 3.5: The percentage of the twelve error types in the multiple choice test

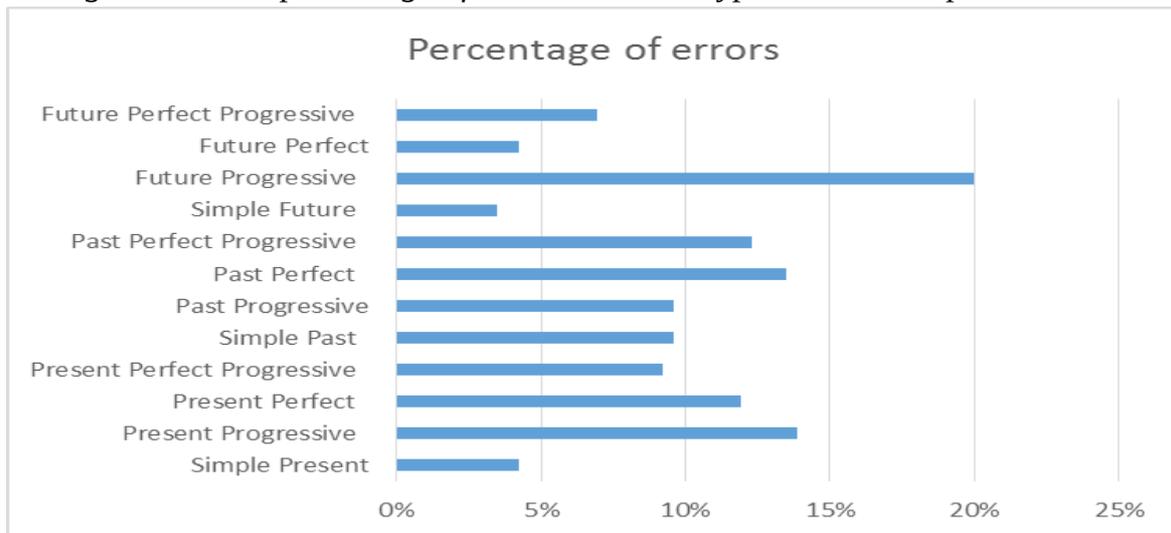


Figure 3.5 shows the percentage of collected tests that contained the twelve types of errors. As illustrated in the graph, errors in future progressive tense took up the most considerable percentage of 20% totally, which was followed by past perfect progressive, past perfect, present perfect and present progressive ones. Only 7% to 9% of the tested items in future perfect progressive, past progressive, simple past and present perfect progressive tenses were done incorrectly. The three other tenses including future perfect, simple future and simple present had the minimum error proportion.

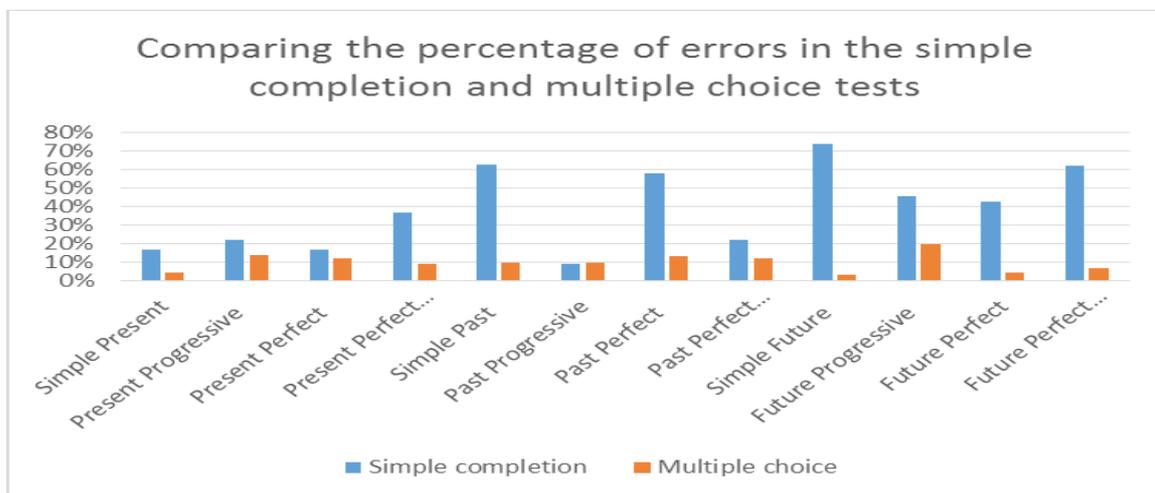


Figure 3.6: Comparing the percentage of errors in the SC and MC tests

The above graph compares the errors in the simple completion test with those in the multiple choice one. It is seen that students performed much better in the MC than in the SC test. The greatest percentage of the students using simple future tense incorrectly in the SC (74%) was opposite to the smallest proportion of them

performing badly in the MC (3%). There was also a significant gap (ranging from 30% to well over 50%) between the errors in the SC and MC that dealt with present perfect progressive, simple past, past perfect and the three other future tenses. Nevertheless, both tests did not cause many problems related to the simple present, present progressive, present perfect, past progressive or past perfect progressive tenses.

Results from the questionnaires for students and teacher interviews

From students' reflection in the questionnaires, it is seen that no students never or always made those errors. The majority of them (72%) sometimes had difficulties with verb tense shift and the rest often found this part challenging. Details for the frequency at which students had difficulties in using each verb tense shift is shown in the table below.

Tenses	Frequency of having difficulties			
	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
Simple Present	56%	41%	3%	0%
Present Progressive	47%	53%	2%	0%
Present Perfect	22%	70%	6%	2%
Present Perfect Progressive	14%	64%	20%	2%
Simple Past	43%	54%	3%	0%
Past Progressive	25%	69%	7%	0%
Past Perfect	17%	61%	22%	0%
Past Perfect Progressive	6%	56%	36%	2%
Simple Future	33%	62%	5%	0%
Future Progressive	23%	56%	18%	3%
Future Perfect	19%	49%	32%	0%
Future Perfect Progressive	13%	44%	42%	2%

Table 3.1: Frequency of students' difficulties with the twelve verb tenses as reflected in the survey

It is seen that for students, the level of difficulty in using each tense varied remarkably. The uses of **perfect tenses were highly rated** for making students confused with the highest frequency belonging to the three perfect progressive tenses, as about 70% of the students sometimes and often made the errors. This point was also agreed by the teachers in the interviews. Besides, teacher A explained that her students were also sometimes confused between future progressive and future perfect progressive as both tenses expressed the actions happening in the future. That

teacher' idea matched with the report of most students (74%) in the survey that they sometimes or often had difficulties with future progressive tense, and actually 40% of the test takers in the SC failed to give the correct verb forms.

Most other tenses were just sometimes challenging to students. Also from students' reflection in the questionnaire, about half of them never performed badly when dealing with simple present or present progressive tenses, the other half just sometimes made errors related to these two tenses. However, teacher A realized that the very first error was present progressive tense with future meaning.

In a nutshell, there were both similarities and differences in the results collected from the three instruments. Students performed much better in the MC than in the SC test. They made a lot of errors in most perfect tenses, however, although the error percentage for the present perfect and present perfect continuous tenses in the tests were low, the two tenses were considered to be more confusing as reflected by students and teachers. While both teachers and students thought that simple future tense should never be a difficult part for students, the tenses proved to be challenging when given in the SC test. Among the reflection about other tenses, the only outstanding idea was of one teacher about present progressive with future meaning.

3.1.2. Discussion and implications

In general, it can be concluded that students did not have many problems in using verb tense shifts as most of them made less than 20% of the total errors. However, there were some great differences in students' performances in the simple completion as compared to the multiple choice ones. Moreover, there were both similarities and differences between students' reflection in the survey and teacher's opinion in the interview.

Firstly, the most surprisingly problematic tense was **simple future**. Although the greatest number of students used simple future tense incorrectly in the SC test, a very small group had difficulty with this tense in MC form. This fact seems to match the participants' ideas in the questionnaire that most of them sometimes found simple future tense challenging. However the teacher did not consider this tense to be difficult to their students, so even though normally the tense could be very simple and

both teachers and students did not have to pay attention to it, students were confused and failed to recognize the tense in a specific context.

Secondly, the significant gap between the errors in the SC-MC tests and the report of the participants suggest that there should also be more attention given to **the six perfect tenses**, especially **three perfect progressive tenses**. It was explained by the teachers that students often mistook present perfect with present perfect continuous tense, etc.... In the tests at secondary schools or occasional tests provided by high school teachers, these tenses were compared with only one or two other similar tenses like present perfect and present perfect progressive, future progressive and future perfect progressive, ... so it was much easier for the students to use the correct verb shifts. The arising problem is that students were able to give the correct verb tenses very well when there were not many tenses being required or tested, but they failed to do it correctly in a context with more different time periods. Teacher B also said that *“In the MC test, students have maximum four tenses to choose, and even in their writings, they use only present tenses for their argumentative essays, or past tenses for narratives. So they have dealt with only two or three tenses at a time, which is very simple. Therefore they hardly made errors”*. Besides, although teacher A reported that her students often had difficulties with present progressive (future meaning), the test results showed that the issue she suggested was not too serious. Therefore, taking MC tests and using only a few tenses at a time had quite a lot of influence on students’ errors.

The least number of errors was found in the simple present and past progressive tenses, so the tense shifting of these two caused few difficulties to the students.

3.2. Major findings and discussion of research question 2:

What are the major causes for those errors as perceived by both the teachers and students?

3.2.1. Major findings

The multifaceted answers to this question were given after the survey and interviews for both teachers and students were carried out. The findings were presented based on the four main causes categorized by Selinker (1974) and Broughton et al. (2002) in the literature review and the difference between MC and

SC tests analyzed in the methodology chapter. The last factor, influence of spoken language, was also added according to the students' answers.

Factors	Not at all	Very little	Somewhat	To a great extent
The influence of Vietnamese	12%	62%	23%	3%
The influence of teacher's teaching methods	26%	69%	5%	0%
The influence of students' study strategies	14%	48%	35%	3%
The influence of the study materials related to verb tense shift	25%	44%	23%	8%
The influence of students' wrong usage of verb tense shift (overgeneralization, ignorance of restricted rules or false rule application)	12%	63%	25%	0%
The influence of spoken language	97%	3%	0%	0%

Table 3.2: The influence of different factors on the errors in verb tense shift as reported by the students in the survey

Students' learning strategies

According to 86% of the students in the survey and most student participants in the interview, their learning strategies had the greatest influence on their errors as compared to other factors. It was further explained that those students had done just a few exercises, which was not enough for them to be very competent in using verb tense shift, or they gave the correct verb forms according to their common sense and were not sure about the correct uses. Besides, SG A and two member of SG B informed the researcher that they just sometimes studied carelessly or did not know how to think logically to give the correct verb shift, which would be further explained by the teachers.

Students' inappropriate learning strategies were also the main cause for those errors according to both teachers. As explained by teacher A: *“Rote learning is certainly not good as students only try to remember some common cases and apply to the similar exercises, but they fail to give the correct verb shift in different contexts.”* The problem there was that they did not try to think critically and logically to draw

the rules of using verb tenses themselves, which led to **their wrong uses of verb tense shift such as overgeneralization, ignorance of restricted rules or false rule application**. For example, being given an exercise on articles, students only paid attention to article uses in the given sentences, without observing the use of verb tense shift.

Moreover, the teachers pointed out another cause that was the curriculum for the English subject. It focused on the four skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening), and grammar, which was regarded as an extra part, was not a priority for students to study so deeply.

The influence of Vietnamese

Although many learners assumed that the importance of Vietnamese was little, some 26% of the students claimed that there was quite a lot of Vietnamese impact, which was reckoned by the big difference between Vietnamese and English structures or contexts.

Teacher A and the twelve students in the interviews also mentioned the influence of Vietnamese on students' errors in verb tense shift, which happened when students translated word by word to infer the meanings from Vietnamese to English and gave the incorrect forms of past simple and present perfect tenses. The students also said that Vietnamese influenced their verb shift in English because these tenses in our mother tongue were much simpler. However, this influence just seldom took place.

The influence of the study materials related to verb tense shift

As regards study materials, 75% of the students reported in the survey that this factor had influence on their errors while half of the responses to the interviews showed that some available books on verb tense shift offered different answers to the same sentences, which caused confusion to them. On the other hand, all students in SG A would like to have more tasks with specific situations or contexts to practise.

But teachers' opinions were different. They claimed that all teachers had given various kinds of study materials in different exercise forms to the students, especially those attending the national gifted team. Besides, there was a huge source of related

books at the school library to serve students' self-study purposes. So students should have no difficulties in having access to appropriate materials on high school campus. However, there was a fact shown in the interview with students that only those with high scores had the priority to borrow good books in advance, so many others were not able to borrow the books they wanted, other books did not seem updated so they just did not want to spend time on them.

The influence of exercise types

In teachers' opinion on MC and SC tests, teacher A said that for gifted students who had studied English grammar very carefully, both types should cause no problems to them. But with those who had not studied very carefully, their performance in the SC test could not be as good as in the MC one because in the SC, students had to base on the contexts and link the ideas, which was much more difficult than choosing from some given answers in the MC. However, teacher B assumed that SC should always be more difficult for students. The increasing application of MC test in assessment with a large proportion of reading comprehension did not require students to dig deeper into the use of grammar. Most of the time they only needed to understand the word meanings to choose the correct answers, so there was no need for them to brainstorm a lot. Besides, there were four clues in the options which allowed them to guess although they did not fully understand the given contexts. The interview for students also revealed that all of them wanted to practise and learn from the SC exercises.

The impact of spoken language

Besides the above factors, two students also mentioned the impact of spoken language on the way they used verb tense shift in written form, which received different opinions as reported in the interview with the student group. To them, spoken language was seen in what they heard or saw in movies or TV programs. The students from group A thought that watching TV programs or listening to music helped them know how to use the tenses better. One student even said that she used to give the correct verb tense shift basing on a song she had just listened to. On the contrary, two students from group B assumed that spoken language had a bad influence on their written tasks. They explained that as some words, especially

auxiliary verbs were often omitted when people spoke, this was then transferred to their writing. Besides, sometimes the pronunciation of ‘-s’ and ‘-ed’ in present and past participles were not clear, so it was hard to realize the tenses. However, apart from these students, the others saw no impact of spoken language on their written errors.

3.2.2. Discussions and implications

It was agreed by the students and teachers that all the causes listed in the survey influenced the error making of the students at various degrees.

It was reported that students’ inappropriate learning strategies was the main cause leading to the errors. As Oxford (1990) has made it clear that good learning strategies help learner to aid his/ her learning, some students admitted that they had not had the right strategies and they were not active in learning the use of verb tense shift themselves, rote learning also had an influence on students’ use of verb tense shift. Moreover, the focus on four skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening) might have blurred away the importance of grammar in the study of the students while it should be noticed that correct verb tense shift affects all those four skills.

On the other hand, overgeneralization, ignorance of restricted rules or false rule application were influential in students’ language use. The reasons for these causes may be rooted from both students’ ways of learning as mentioned above and the ineffective teaching of some secondary school teachers. These teachers had given them some unclear lectures, not mentioning any special verb tense use or had not offered them enough encouragement to brainstorm and be flexible in using verb tense shift. Therefore, the right instructions from the beginning play a very important role in the occurrence or reduction of errors.

As for study materials, while the teacher claimed that there was a variety of choices for the knowledge on verb tense shift, some students still found it uneasy to choose the most reliable sources and avoid those books with so many answers to one exercise or task. Besides, they were also reluctant to ask for teacher’s advice on the good sources. The lack of study materials has led to students’ improper knowledge in using verb tense shift.

The uses of MC and SC tests seemed to have found the agreement of both teachers and students. It was claimed that the wide application of MC in testing had made students' errors increased.

Both student participants and the two teachers agreed that the influence of Vietnamese on their errors was minor. The participants' opinions match with Zhiliang (2011) that the incorrect transfer from Vietnamese to English led to students' wrong use of verb shift. So the bad habit of transferring between the two languages should be reminded and avoided. Besides, as students were still not clear about the existence of tenses in Vietnamese, it is helpful to let students know the difference between tenses in Vietnamese and English.

Some students did mention the impact of spoken language on the way they used verb tense shift in written form. However, there were both positive and negative effects. On one hand, listening to native speakers helped learners be familiar with the context and know how to use the verb shift effectively. On the other hand, as in spoken language there were often incomplete sentences, colloquial phrases and omission of words, these elements formed students' bad habits in their writing. These habits became systematic errors, students might omit essential particles, and could not produce the full verb forms. Therefore, it is necessary to raise learners' awareness about the difference between spoken and written language to avoid such bad habits.

3.3. Suggestions to minimize those errors of teachers and students

3.3.1. Major findings

On one hand, students' opinions on different ways to minimize the errors are visualized in the following figure.

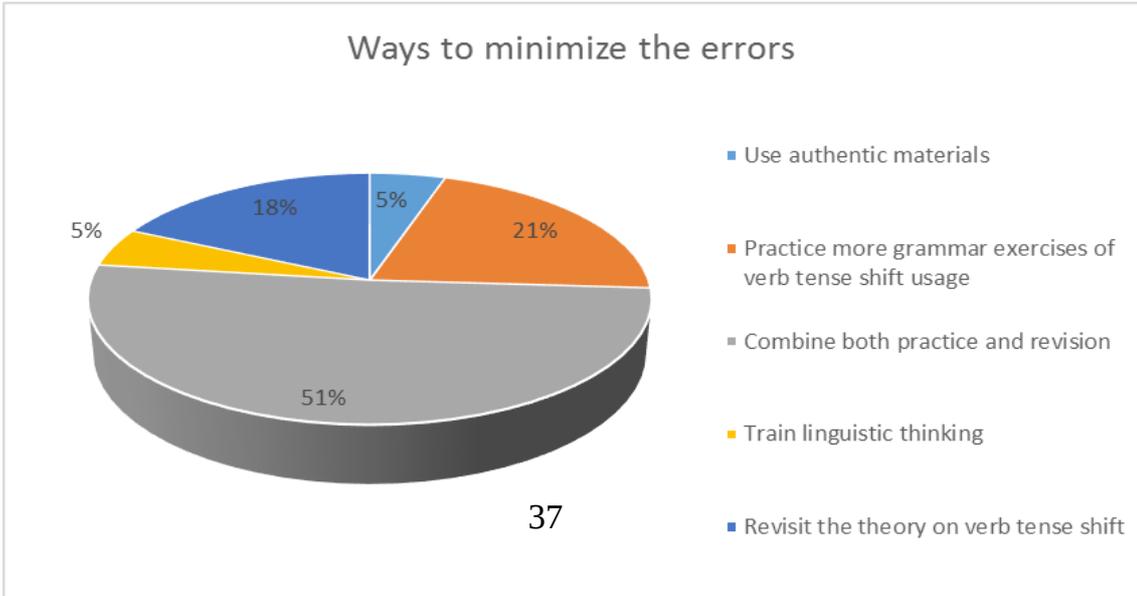


Figure 3.7: Ways to minimize the errors in verb tense shift

As can be seen from the graph, the students chose different ways to overcome the errors in verb tense shift. The most popular solution was **combining both the practice of exercises and revision of theory**, which was agreed by about half of the participants (51%). On the other hand, some 40% of the students chose to revisit the theory or practise the exercises separately. Only 5% of the learners would like to have some linguistic thinking training. Similarly, there were few students expressing the desire for more authentic materials so that they could be exposed to real situations to give the correct verb forms naturally and correctly.

On the other hand, the researcher also interviewed the two teachers for ways to overcome those errors. Although the teachers had **not given any lectures about verb tenses or verb tense shift** in specific to their students and they also had no intention to give such lectures in the future, both of them suggested that letting their students practise all the types of exercises in written forms, not the MC ones would improve the situation. They would like the students to produce the sentences themselves so that they fully understand the verb uses in different contexts.

As revealed in the questionnaires, one fifth of the students reported that most of their teachers at secondary school had given them **detailed suggestions** on how to correct their errors, which were very effective. Some teachers had offered the similar examples so their students could understand their lectures more easily, teachers also pointed out the errors that needed to be avoided, which was helpful. But most other learners thought that teachers' advice had been just somewhat effective. Likewise, the same learners regarded **the theory and practice periods** were relatively useful to them. Some students gave the explanation that although most of the time teachers' help made them understand the new knowledge more easily, there were some teachers at secondary school who taught so fast or just gave unclear lectures in which no special verb tense use was mentioned. Therefore, students were still confused after such lessons. On the other hand, these learners wanted their instructors to encourage them to brainstorm and be flexible, avoid rote learning so that they knew how to use verb tense shift effectively by themselves.

Furthermore, teacher A also emphasized **the importance of students' clear objectives in learning and the passion to master the language**. She said that about 10% of the students each year who had the clear objectives of studying abroad or were very indulged in mastering the English language could perform very well. They were not only fluent in using verb tense shift in specific, but all other aspects of English grammar and all the four skills as well. On the same issue, the researcher interviewed 12 students and they admitted sometimes they did not study hard enough or pay attention to their errors, thus it was more possible that those errors were repeated.

The following section includes the discussion on the results obtained from the three instruments: students' test (both simple completion and multiple choice), questionnaires and interviews with teachers and students.

3.3.2. Discussions and implications

Two teachers and most of the students have found the agreement on the combination of both the practice of exercises and revision of theory to overcome the difficulties in verb tense shift. Besides, most other students chose to revisit the theory or practise the exercises separately. The researcher found that all the three solutions have been applied, but they seemed not to be as effective as expected, which may be originated from the incorrect ways to revise or practise. Then it may be better if teachers at both secondary and high schools spend more time on exercises in written forms, not the MC ones or at least give students guidance for self –study, so that students know how to produce the sentences themselves, thus they fully understand the nature of the language. However, the exercises should combine some tenses used in a context, and different contexts should also be given, so that critical and logical thinking of students can be elicited at most.

The researcher realizes that while at secondary schools, most of the time students learn about the uses of each verb tense separately, at high schools, they should pay more attention to the use of verb shift in meaningful contexts given in a speech, passage or essay, and produce the correct tense shifting themselves. Besides, it is also necessary that students be aware of the role of verb shifts, which affects all the other four skills (Listening, Writing, Reading and Speaking).

Inferring from the causes for errors, the researcher believes that raising students' awareness towards the influence of Vietnamese and spoken language in English can be very helpful in avoiding the errors. The study has also gained some compelling suggestions on the training of linguistic thinking, the use of more authentic materials for the natural use of verb tense shift and students' clear objectives in learning and the passion to master the language. The researcher believes that these ideas should be useful to some extent and their effectiveness may be further explored by teachers or researchers.

PART III: CONCLUSION

The last chapter of the thesis paper covers for a summary of major findings and the acknowledgement of some limitations, then some suggestions for further studies are given as well.

1. Summary of major findings

The collected data have fulfilled the aims of the study to answer the two research questions about common errors in verb tense shifts made by 10th graders in their exercises and causes for them.

In answering the first research question about common errors in the exercises for English – specializing 10th graders at TBSHS, although students did not have many problems in using verb tense shifts, they made errors in all the twelve tenses and performed much better in the MC than the SC tests. On one hand, the most surprisingly problematic tense was simple future with the highest percentage of errors in the SC exercise. The second ranks were the six perfect tenses, especially three perfect progressive tenses as seen in the test, both teachers and students in the interviews also agreed that these tenses were difficult to learners. On the other hand, the shifting of simple present and past progressive tenses caused just few difficulties to the students.

As for the second question about the causes for those errors, students' inappropriate learning strategies were reported to be the most dominant one. These strategies, together with the ineffective ways of teaching of some secondary school

teachers made it easier for students to overgeneralize, ignore rules and apply those rules incorrectly. Another cause was the lack of self-study materials, which led to students' insufficient knowledge in using verb tense shift. In addition, the wide application of MC in testing made students' errors increased. Last but not least, there was little impact of Vietnamese and spoken language.

Suggestions for students and teachers to minimize those errors were also given in the study. One solution was to choose the proper ways to revise theory and practise exercises in written form. Moreover, the minor impact of Vietnamese and spoken language suggested that learners should be reminded of these two factors to minimize their possible errors. There were also some compelling suggestions on the training of linguistic thinking, the use of more authentic materials, the use of verb shift in meaningful contexts, students' clear objectives in learning and the passion to master the language.

2. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Although this study provides an overview of grade-10 students' common errors in verb tense shift and causes for them in two English specializing class settings at TBSHS, the researcher is well aware of its two limitations, thus some suggestions for further research are recommended below.

Firstly, despite the thorough investigation into the subject of the study, it is seen that the scope of this study was quite small as it was carried out in just one high school. Throughout the country, there are more than 60 other specializing high schools so further research should extend the scope, then some comparison between different schools can be made, the results might also be more varied and there will be objective and deeper insight into students' errors.

Secondly, this study is just a primary source in which causes for the errors were reported and some ways to minimize the errors were suggested. It will be more helpful if the other research investigates deeply into the effectiveness of such suggestions to minimize the errors as the training of linguistic thinking, students' clear objectives in learning or the passion to master the language. After that, maybe some effective new ways to teach and learn verb tense shift in specific and English grammar in general can be applied.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: VERB TENSE TEST

Name:.....

Class:

Exercise 1: Give one appropriate form of the verb "sleep" to fill in each blank below to make a meaningful story.

It's Sleepy time, Nighty Night, Sis

By Sally Jennings

"Well I see you are finally here, Cynthia." Carol said to her sister as the screen door banged shut. "Where have you been? I've been waiting and waiting for you. You said you would be here an hour ago. Remember? Three o'clock, not four o'clock?"

"I know," Cynthia answered, "I was too tired. Working night shift is just too much sometimes. When I got in bed this morning, I had it all planned, timewise, I mean. I set my alarm clock and thought, now let's see, by two o'clock, I(1) _____ for eight hours. That will be perfect. Eight hours will be plenty. Well ha, ha, sure didn't work right. Too many interruptions. When I sleep at night, I(2) _____ well. I(3) _____ well ever since Lennie moved out three years ago. But this daytime stuff, that's another story."

Carol cleaned up the kitchen sink while Cynthia continued, "I did go to sleep right away. I(4) _____ when Barbara walked by with that loud yappy dog of hers, and woke me up. Then I drifted off to sleep again, no problem. I(5) _____ for two hours when the phone rang for Molly, and woke me up. So then I got up and had a little bit to eat. Maybe the food was a mistake, I don't know. It took me a long time after the snack to go back to sleep."

"I(6) _____ for three more hours when Larry's motorcycle broke down in his driveway next door, and that woke me up. Of course, Larry had to fix it right away, right there in the driveway. And as you know, he is not very good at motorcycle repair. Test, run the motor, retest, run it again, and all that. Well, when that happened, that was it. I tried, but I didn't go back to sleep after that. So I(7) _____ for five whole hours today, and only five hours, even though I am an hour late."

"Okay, okay, okay, I believe you, now can we get out the door here and on the way?" pleaded Carol.

"Sure, I have it all planned." Cynthia continued. "We're taking your car, so you can drive. I hope that if you glance over my way during the trip, you can truthfully say, I see that Cynthia (8) _____. Or better yet, Cynthia (9) _____ for two hours."

"Yes, right," Carol sighed. "If you had slept enough earlier, well, never mind. You just go right ahead and sleep the whole trip. In fact, I predict that you (10) _____ when we reach the freeway, and that you (11) _____ for three hours. How's that?"

"Oh wonderful," said Cynthia as she settled into the front passenger's seat of Carol's car. "Wake me up at Mom's house. By that time I (12) _____ for three hours. Oh joy, oh rest my weary soul. It's sleepy time, nighty night, Sis."

Exercise 2: Choose one best answer for each question below. (Adapted from Wang, 2012)

1. "Hurry up! We're waiting for you. What's taking you so long?"

"I _____ for an important phone call. Go ahead and leave without me."

A. wait B. will wait C. am waiting D. have waited

2. "Robert is going to be famous someday. He ___ in three movies already."

"I am sure he'll be a star."

A. has been appearing C. has appeared
B. had appeared D. appeared

3. "Where's Polly?" "She ___."

A. is in her room studying C. studies in her room
B. in her room is studying D. has in her room studied

4. "Hello? Alice? This is Jeff. How are you?"

"Jeff? What a coincidence! I ___ about you when the phone rang."

A. was just thinking C. have just been thinking
B. have just thought D. was just thought

5. You haven't decided yet about buying a new bicycle. You say "I _____ about it"

A. think C. thought
B. am thinking D. has thought

6. "When is Mr. Fields planning to retire?"

"Soon, I think. He ___ here for a long time. He'll probably retire either next year or the year after that."

A. worked C. has been working
B. had been working D. is working

7. Jim: "It's a secret". Tony: "I _____ anyone, I promise."

A. am not telling C. won't tell
B. don't tell D. won't have told

8. "Let's go! What's taking you so long?" "I'll be there as soon as I ___ my keys."

- A. found B. will find C. find D. am finding
9. Next week when there ___ a full moon, the ocean tides will be higher.
- A. is being B. is C. will be D. will have been
10. While I ___ TV last night, a mouse ran across the floor.
- A. watch B. watches C. was watching D. am watching
11. Fish were among the earliest forms of life. Fish ___ on earth for ages and ages.
- A. existed B. are existing C. exist D. have existed
12. The phone ___ constantly since Jack announced his candidacy for president this morning.
- A. has been ringing B. rang C. had rung D. had been ringing
13. The earth ___ on the sun for its heat and light.
- A. is depend B. depending C. had depend D. depends
14. I don't feel good. I ___ home from work tomorrow.
- A. am staying B. stay C. will have stayed D. stayed
15. Today there are weather satellites that beam down information about the earth's atmosphere. In the last two decades, space exploration ___ great contributions to weather forecasting.
- A. is making B. has made C. made D. makes
16. On July 20, 1969, Astronaut Neil Armstrong ___ onto the moon, the first person ever to set foot on another celestial body.
- A. was stepping B. stepped C. has stepped D. was step
17. The plane's departure was delayed because of mechanical difficulties. When the weary passengers finally boarded the aircraft, many were annoyed and irritable because they ___ in the airport for three and a half hours.
- A. are waiting B. were waiting C. have been waiting D. had been waiting
18. If coastal erosion continues to take place at the present rate, in other fifty years this beach ___ anymore.
- A. doesn't exist B. isn't going to exist C. isn't existing D. won't exist
19. Homestead High School's football team ___ a championship until last season, when the new coach led them to win first place in their league.
- A. has never won C. had never been wining
- B. is never winning D. had never won

A. help B. will help C. am going to help D. am helping

28. Just relax, Antoine. As soon as your sprained ankle heals, you can play soccer again. At this time next week, you _____ soccer again.

A. will play B. are playing C. play D. will be playing

29. "Are you going to be in town next Saturday?" "No, I _____ my aunt."

A. will be visiting C. have visited
B. visit D. will have visited

30. I know you feel bad now, Tommy, but try to put it out of your mind. By the time you're an adult, you _____ all about it.

A. forget B. will have forgotten C. will forget D. forgot

31. Mary was born in 1975. By the year 2025, she _____ on this earth for 50 years.

A. will have been living B. is living C. lives D. had lived

32. After ten unhappy years, Janice finally quit her job. She _____ along with her boss for a long time before she finally decided to look for a new position.

A. hadn't been getting B. isn't getting C. didn't get D. hasn't been getting

33. They _____ about something when I walked into the room.

A. were arguing B. argued C. had argued D. have argued

34. After Mark graduated from high school, he _____ to go to college and stayed there for five years.

A. had gone B. was going C. went D. has gone

35. Jim, why don't you take some time off? You _____ too hard lately. Take a short vacation.

A. worked B. work C. were working D. have been working

36. A: Let's go to the carnival, shall we?

B: Yes, that's good idea. I expect it _____ fun.

A. will be B. is C. is being D. will have been

37. A minor earthquake occurred at 2:07 A.M. on January 3. Most of the people in the village _____ at the time and didn't even know it had occurred until the next morning.

A. slept B. had slept C. were sleeping D. sleep

38. The little girl started to cry. She _____ her doll, and no one was able to find it for her.

KEY TO TEST

Exercise 1:

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| (1) Will have slept | (7) Slept |
| (2) Sleep | (8) Is sleeping |
| (3) Have slept | (9) Has been sleeping |
| (4) Was sleeping | (10) Will be sleeping |
| (5) Had been sleeping | (11) Will sleep |
| (6) Had slept | (12) Will have been sleeping |

Exercise 2:

- | | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. C | 13. D | 25. C | 37. C |
| 2. C | 14. A | 26. A | 38. B |
| 3. A | 15. B | 27. B | 39. D |
| 4. A | 16. B | 28. D | 40. D |
| 5. B | 17. D | 29. A | 41. C |
| 6. C | 18. D | 30. B | 42. C |
| 7. C | 19. D | 31. A | 43. C |
| 8. C | 20. C | 32. A | 44. C |
| 9. B | 21. C | 33. A | 45. C |
| 10. C | 22. A | 34. C | 46. B |
| 11. D | 23. B | 35. D | 47. B |
| 12. A | 24. C | 36. A | 48. B |

ERROR DISTRIBUTION FOR MC:

Tenses	Question numbers
Simple Present	8. 9. 13. 26.
Present Progressive	1. 3. 5. 14.
Present Perfect	2. 11. 15. 22.
Present Perfect Progressive	6. 12. 24. 35.
Simple Past	16. 34. 44. 47.
Past Progressive	4. 10. 37. 33.
Past Perfect	19. 38. 45. 48.
Past Perfect Progressive	17. 25. 32. 40.
Simple Future	7. 18. 27. 36.
Future Progressive	21.23. 28. 29.
Future Perfect	30. 39. 41.42.
Future Perfect Progressive	20. 31. 43. 46.

APPENDIX II: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS

I am Nguyễn Thị Hòa from University of Languages and International Studies.

*For the fulfillment of my thesis paper, I am conducting a study on: **COMMON ERRORS IN ENGLISH VERB TENSE SHIFTS MADE BY TENTH-GRADERS AT THAI BINH SPECIALIZING HIGH SCHOOL.***

In order to carry out this study, I would be very grateful if you could spend some time completing the following questionnaire.

If you have any questions, feel free to ask me.

1. How often do you repeat the errors in using verb tense shift? (a verb tense shift occurs when verb tense is changed in the same sentence or in following sentences)

- A. Never
- B. Sometimes
- C. Often
- D. Always

→ If you choose “A. Never”, please skip questions 2-5.

2. How often do you have difficulties in using English verb tense shift? (Please tick ✓ at the suitable box to answer.



Never Sometimes Often Always

Tenses	Frequency of having difficulties			
	1	2	3	4
Simple Present				
Present Progressive				
Present Perfect				
Present Perfect Progressive				
Simple Past				
Past Progressive				
Past Perfect				
Past Perfect Progressive				
Simple Future				
Future Progressive				

Future Perfect				
Future Perfect Progressive				

3. *To what extent do the following factors influence you when you made an error in using the verb tense shift? Rate each one by putting a tick (✓) in the suitable box.*



Not at all *Very little* *Somewhat* *To a great extent*

Factors	1	2	3	4
The influence of Vietnamese				
The influence of teacher's teaching methods				
The influence of your study strategies				
The influence of the study materials related to verb tense shift				
The influence of your wrong usage of verb tense shift (overgeneralization, ignorance of restricted rules or false rule application)				
Others (please specify)				

Please explain your choice:

4. *Did your teachers give you detailed suggestions about how to correct the errors in using verb tense shift?*

- A. Yes, always
- B. Yes, often
- C. Yes, sometimes
- D. No, never

5. *Do you think that your teachers gave you effective suggestions in correcting verb shift error?*

- A. Yes, very effective
- B. Yes, somewhat effective
- C. Yes, a little effective
- D. No, ineffective

Please explain your choice:

6. *Did you have official lessons that provided you with the THEORY on using verb tenses, in general, and the tense shift, in particular?*
- A. Yes
 - B. No → Skip question 7
7. *To what extent are official lessons on the theory of using verb tense shift useful for you in using the verb tense shift correctly?*
- A. Not at all
 - B. Very little
 - C. Somewhat
 - D. To a great extent
8. *Did you have official lessons that gave you time to PRACTICE using verb tenses, in general, and the tense shift, in particular?*
- A. Yes
 - B. No → Skip question 9
9. *To what extent are official lessons on practicing of using verb tense shift useful for you in using the verb tense shift correctly?*
- A. Not at all
 - B. Very little
 - C. Somewhat
 - D. To a great extent

Please explain your choice:

.....

10. *What do you do to minimize the errors in using verb tense shift?*
- A. Revisit the theory of verb tense shift
 - B. Practice more grammar exercises of verb tense shift usage
 - C. Combine both practice and revision
 - D. Others, please specify:

.....

.....

Please give us your personal information.

Your personal information will be kept confidential and used for research purpose only.

1. Name: _____ Class: _____
2. Email: _____
3. Phone number: _____
4. How long have you been learning English? _____
5. Which secondary school did you study at? _____

Thank you a lot!

**APPENDIX III: QUESTIONS FOR THE SEMI- STRUCTURED
INTERVIEWS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS**

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Nguyen Thi Hoa

Question 1: Have you ever given a lecture about verb tenses or verb tense shift in specific to your students?

If yes, how long did the lecture(s) last?

If no, do you intend to give such a lecture? and why.

Question 2: In your opinion, which tenses cause more problems to students?

Question 3: Do you think that the types of exercises (simple completion and multiple choice in this study) have certain influence on students 'competence in using verb tense shift? If yes, please specify that influence.

(After that the researcher gives the teacher the test results and move to the next questions)

- The language competence of the students in the two classes is not equivalent.
- In general, the students performed better in the MC test.
- There are some students who did very well with SC did not do as well with the MC

Question 4: In your opinion, what are the causes for those errors?

Question 5: In your opinion, what should be done to help students acquire the knowledge in using verb tense shift and minimize the errors?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Interviewee group:

Interviewer: Nguyen Thi Hoa

Question 1:

Have you ever received a lecture about verb tenses or verb tense shift in specific?

If yes, how long did the lecture(s) last?

If no, do you think such a lecture is necessary to be added to your curriculum?

Question 2:

As reported in your questionnaires, all of the listed factors affected your errors in using verb tense shift, can you explain more about each factor:

- The influence of your study strategies
- The influence of Vietnamese
- The influence of teacher's teaching methods
- The influence of materials
- The influence of your wrong usage of verb tense shift (overgeneralization, ignorance of restricted rules or false rule application)
- The influence of spoken language

Question 3: Do you think that the types of exercises (simple completion and multiple choice in this study) have certain influence on your competence in using verb tense shift?

Question 4: Can you give more details about ways to minimize the errors in verb tense shift:

- Have you combined both the practice of exercises and revisions of theory? If yes, is that effective?
- How do you think linguistic training can be applied?
- What do you think about the use of authentic materials?