

STUDENTS' MASTERY OF SIMPLE PRESENT TENSE IN VERBAL SENTENCES: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY AT SMP BANDAR KLIPPA

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Abstract

This study explores students' mastery of the simple present tense in verbal sentences, emphasizing their ability to construct positive, negative, and interrogative forms. The research was conducted at SMP Bandar Klippa, located in Kecamatan Percut Sei Tuan, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, North Sumatra, during the 2023/2024 academic year. Employing a descriptive quantitative design, the study utilized an objective multiple-choice test as its primary instrument. A purposive sample of 23 students was selected from a population of 142. The findings indicate that students' overall mastery of the simple present tense falls within the "fail" category, with a mean score of 49.56. Among the three forms assessed, Formula I (positive sentences) appeared as the most dominant, with a mean score of 0.52 or 37%. These results suggest that students struggle more with negative and interrogative sentence construction. Hence, adopting more contextualized and communicative grammar teaching methods is strongly recommended to enhance students' grammatical accuracy and practical use of English in real-life communication.

Keywords: *grammar instruction; simple present tense; students' mastery; verbal sentences*

1. Introduction

Language serves as the primary medium through which people communicate, build relationships, and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas. It is an essential element of human interaction and societal development. Oviogun and Veerdee (2020) describe language as a system of symbols that enables shared understanding within a community, implying that without language, communication would be nearly impossible. Similarly, McLendon (2017) emphasizes that language allows humans to exchange information, share experiences, and achieve mutual understanding. Among the many languages spoken globally, English holds a prominent role as an international language for education, business, science, and technology.

A key aspect of mastering English is grammar, which governs sentence construction and ensures clarity of meaning. Saengboon et al. (2022) underline that grammar provides the framework for word arrangement, sentence creation, and meaning accuracy. In the context of Indonesian education, grammar instruction forms the foundation for developing students' language competence across listening, speaking,

reading, and writing skills. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* and *Kurikulum 2013* both emphasize communicative competence, requiring students not only to understand grammatical rules but also to apply them meaningfully in communication.

One of the most fundamental components of English grammar is the simple present tense, which expresses daily habits, general truths, and timeless facts (Suhadi, 2016). Despite its basic nature, previous studies such as Herlina and Ramasari (2018) and Napratilora and Siagian (2019) show that students often struggle to apply correct verb forms in simple present sentences, particularly when distinguishing between singular and plural subjects or forming negative and interrogative structures. Such grammatical errors can hinder fluency and reduce students' confidence in using English effectively.

Preliminary observations and teacher reports at SMP Bandar Klippa, Kecamatan Percut Sei Tuan, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, North Sumatra, reveal that many students continue to make frequent mistakes when constructing verbal sentences in the simple present tense. These difficulties persist even after receiving formal instruction, suggesting a gap between curriculum expectations and actual classroom outcomes. Furthermore, limited use of contextual and communicative teaching strategies may contribute to students' low grammatical accuracy.

Given these conditions, it is essential to examine students' actual mastery of the simple present tense in verbal sentences to provide empirical data that can inform more effective teaching practices. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of students' ability in using the simple present tense in verbal sentences?
2. What is the most dominant formula used by the students in applying the simple present tense?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Language Ability

Language ability refers to an individual's competence to understand and produce language appropriately within communicative contexts. Mulyaningrum (2019) defines ability as a person's capacity or potential, either innate or developed through learning, to perform specific tasks effectively. In the context of language learning, ability encompasses not only linguistic knowledge but also the cognitive and practical skills required to use language meaningfully. Hence, students' language ability is measured not merely by their understanding of grammatical rules but by their capacity to apply these rules accurately and fluently in real communication.

2.2 The Role of Grammar in Language Learning

Grammar serves as the structural backbone of any language, determining how words are combined to convey coherent meaning. Herlina and Ramasari (2018) emphasize that mastering grammar facilitates effective communication, as it supports accuracy and clarity in both written and spoken forms. Saengboon et al. (2022) further highlight that grammar functions as an organizing system that enables learners to construct syntactically correct sentences. In the context of English language teaching, grammatical competence is an integral component of communicative competence, as outlined in modern pedagogical frameworks such as the Communicative Approach and Task-Based Learning.

However, grammar learning among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students often faces pedagogical challenges. Traditional approaches focusing on rote memorization and isolated exercises tend to separate grammar from real-life communication, making students less engaged and more prone to errors. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) **Interlanguage Error Analysis Theory** explains that such errors arise naturally as part of language development, reflecting learners' attempts to internalize and systematize grammatical rules. Recognizing these errors as a developmental stage rather than failure allows educators to design more effective, learner-centered instruction.

2.3 The Nature and Usage of Simple Present Tense

The simple present tense is one of the most fundamental yet essential grammatical structures in English. It is primarily used to express habitual actions, general truths, or ongoing facts (Suhadi, 2016). Common time expressions associated with this tense include always, usually, often, and every day. Despite its apparent simplicity, mastery of the simple present tense requires understanding subject-verb agreement, particularly in third-person singular forms (e.g., she goes, he plays), and recognizing when auxiliary verbs (do/does) are needed in negative and interrogative sentences. According to Napratilora and Siagian (2019), these structural rules are vital for learners to produce grammatically correct verbal sentences.

2.4 Common Difficulties in Mastering Tenses among EFL Learners

EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties in mastering English tenses due to structural differences between their first language and English. Previous studies (e.g., Herlina & Ramasari, 2018; Napratilora & Siagian, 2019) show that students often confuse verb forms, omit auxiliaries, or fail to adjust verb endings for subject agreement. These issues are consistent with Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) perspective that learner errors are systematic reflections of their evolving interlanguage. In Indonesia, where exposure to English is limited, such errors are intensified by limited communicative practice and a strong focus on written grammar drills. Consequently, students' understanding of tenses—especially the simple present tense—remains superficial, emphasizing form over function.

To address these challenges, grammar instruction should integrate contextual and communicative strategies that encourage students to use target structures meaningfully. Such approaches can help bridge the gap between grammatical knowledge and communicative application, fostering both accuracy and fluency in English language use.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design, aiming to systematically describe students' mastery of the simple present tense in verbal sentences. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), descriptive research is designed to obtain factual and accurate information about existing conditions without manipulating variables. In this study, the researchers focused on analyzing students' ability to construct positive, negative, and interrogative sentences using the simple present tense. Quantitative data were collected through objective tests and analyzed statistically to determine levels of mastery.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of 142 students enrolled at SMP Bandar Klippa, Kecamatan Percut Sei Tuan, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara, during the 2023/2024 academic year. Given the scope of the study, a purposive sampling technique was applied to select 23 students as the sample. This sampling method was chosen based on the participants' accessibility and relevance to the research focus (Sudaryono, 2023). The selected students represented a range of proficiency levels, ensuring a balanced depiction of the population's grammatical competence.

3.3 Research Instrument

The main instrument used in this study was an objective multiple-choice test designed to measure students' ability to use the simple present tense in verbal sentences. The test consisted of 25 items, divided into three categories based on grammatical structure: Formula I (positive), Formula II (negative), and Formula III (interrogative). Each correct answer was scored 4 points, while incorrect responses received 0 points, following the principles of achievement testing as outlined by Widoyoko (2017).

To ensure the instrument's validity and reliability, the test underwent expert validation by two English language lecturers at Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU). The validity process focused on content validity, assessing whether each item adequately represented the learning objectives of the simple present tense as stated in the junior high school curriculum. Reliability testing was conducted using the Cronbach's Alpha method, which is commonly used to measure internal consistency. A coefficient value above 0.70 was considered acceptable, indicating that the test items were consistent and reliable (Arikunto, 2019; Sugiyono, 2022).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through a written test administered in a controlled classroom setting. Students were given 45 minutes to complete the test individually without external assistance. The researcher first explained the instructions clearly to avoid misinterpretation. After the test, students' answer sheets were scored according to predetermined criteria, and their raw scores were tabulated for statistical analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including mean, minimum, maximum, and percentage calculations. The formula used to determine students' mastery level followed Widoyoko (2017), where:

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\text{Total Score}}{\text{Number of Students}}$$

To interpret the results, students' scores were classified into five ability categories:

- 80–100: Very Good
- 70–79: Good
- 60–69: Enough
- 50–59: Less
- 0–49: Fail

These categories were adopted based on standard classification criteria used in educational assessment (Sugiyono, 2022). The interpretation allowed the researcher to describe the overall proficiency level and to determine the dominant grammatical formula used by students in constructing verbal sentences.

4. Discussion

4.1 Sub Topic 1

1. Finding

a. How is the student's ability to using simple present tense in verbal sentences?

The findings were analyzed by percentage formula. This research wanted to find the score level of the students' ability used simple present tense in positive, negative, and interrogative verbal sentences. The presentation of data is in the table below:

No	Students	Formula I	Formula II	Formula III	Total correct answer	Total incorrect answer
1.	ASN	5	2	3	10	15
2.	AZS	7	5	6	18	7
3.	AS	6	7	4	17	8
4.	DRS	4	2	3	7	18
5.	DAT	5	4	5	14	11
6.	DNG	4	3	3	10	15
7.	DTG	5	3	4	12	13
8.	INS	4	6	4	14	11
9.	JFR	3	3	4	10	15
10.	JCN	5	4	2	11	14
11.	KIW	5	4	5	14	11
12.	MA	5	4	5	14	11
13.	MP	6	3	5	14	11
14.	NP	5	4	5	14	11
15.	NS	5	4	6	15	10
16.	PW	4	5	3	12	13
17.	RA	5	3	2	10	15
18.	SZ	3	3	3	9	16
19.	SAH	4	5	3	12	13
20.	SK	4	4	2	10	15
21.	SA	4	4	5	13	12
22.	TPC	7	3	3	13	12
23.	YL	5	3	4	12	13
Total		110	88	89	285	290

Table 4.1. The Total of Students' Correct Answer

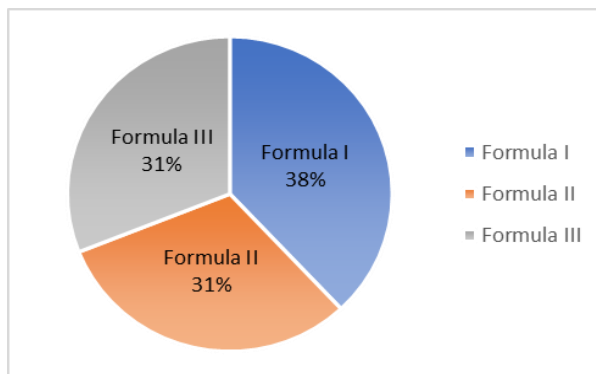


Chart 4.1. Percentage of Correct Answer

Based on the table above, the highest percentage of students' correct answers was found in Formula I (positive sentences), accounting for 38% of the total responses. In contrast, Formula II (negative sentences) and Formula III (interrogative sentences) each accounted for 30%. Furthermore, the researcher calculated the students' overall scores, assigning 4 points for each correct answer and 0 points for incorrect responses. The distribution of students' scores in mastering the simple present tense in verbal sentences is presented as follows.

No	Students	Score	Level of Ability
1.	ASN	40	Fail
2.	AZS	72	Good
3.	AS	68	Enough
4.	DRS	28	Fail
5.	DAT	56	Less
6.	DNG	40	Fail
7.	DTG	48	Fail
8.	INS	56	Less
9.	JFR	40	Fail
10.	JCN	44	Fail
11.	KIW	56	Less
12.	MA	56	Less
13.	MP	56	Less
14.	NP	56	Less
15.	NS	60	Enough
16.	PW	48	Fail
17.	RA	40	Fail
18.	SZ	36	Fail
19.	SAH	48	Fail
20.	SK	40	Fail
21.	SA	52	Less
22.	TPC	52	Less
23.	YL	48	Fail
Total		1.140	
Mean Score		49,56	Fail

Table 4.2. Students' Score of Simple Present Tense in Verbal Sentences

The writer also presented the frequency and percentage of the students' ability to use the simple present tense in verbal sentences, as summarized below.

No.	Score	Level of Ability	Frequency	Percentage %
1	80 – 100	Very Good	0	0
2	70 – 79	Good	1	4
3	60 – 69	Enough	2	9
4	50 – 59	Less	8	35
5	0 – 49	Fail	12	52
Total			23	100

Table 4.3. The Frequency and Percentage of Students' Ability used Simple Present Tense in Verbal Sentences

From the table above, it can be seen that there is no student at the “very good” level of ability. There is 1 student at the “good” level of ability, with the percentage of 1%. There are 2 students at “enough” level of ability, with the percentage of 9%. There are 8 students at “enough” level of ability, with the percentage of 35%. And there are 12 students at the level of ability “fail”, with the percentage of 52%.

Meanwhile, the writer presented the percentage of students' ability used simple present tense in verbal sentences score distribution as follows:

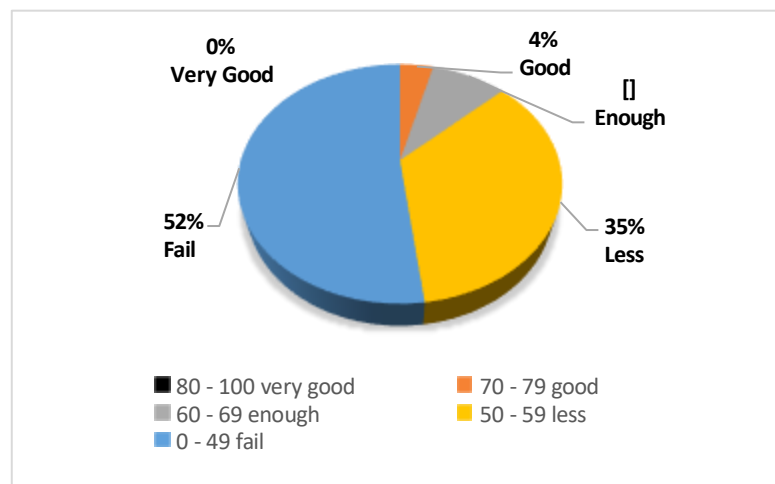


Chart 4.2 The Percentage of Students' Simple Present Tense Sentences Ability

From the chart above, it can be seen that there is 0% of student at the “very good” level of ability. There are 4% of students at the “good” level of ability, 9% of students at the level of ability “enough”, 35% of students at the level of ability “less” and 52% of students at the level of ability “fail”. For analyzing the data of students' ability to use simple present tense in verbal sentences, can be seen from the following table:

	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean
Simple Present Tense Sentence Ability	23	28	72	1140	49.56

Table 4.4 Descriptive Statistics of Students' Ability to Use Simple Present Tense in Verbal Sentences

From the table, it can be seen that the mean of students' ability in using simple present tense in verbal sentences is 49.56, which means that the category for students' ability used simple present tense in verbal sentences is "fail". Next, the minimum score is 28, and the maximum score is 72.

b. What is the dominant formula of simple present tense in verbal sentences?

The writer analyzed the formula of simple present tense in verbal sentences. The analysis is explained as follows:

1. Formula I

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Sum	Mean
Item 1	23	21	0.91
Item 2	23	20	0.86
Item 9	23	13	0.56
Item 10	23	8	0.34
Item 15	23	16	0.69
Item 16	23	13	0.56
Item 17	23	5	0.21
Item 21	23	13	0.56
Item 23	23	0	0
Total	207	109	4.69
Total Mean Score			0.52

From the table above, it can be seen that the mean score of item 1 is 0.91, item 2 is 0.86, item 9 is 0.56, item 10 is 0.34, item 15 is 0.69, item 16 is 0.56, item 17 is 0.21, item 21 is 0.56, and item 23 is 0. In conclusion, the total mean score of simple present tense in verbal sentences type I is 0.52.

2. Formula II

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Sum	Mean
Item 3	23	13	0.56
Item 5	23	11	0.47
Item 8	23	14	0.60
Item 11	23	19	0.82
Item 14	23	18	0.78
Item 19	23	4	0.17
Item 20	23	2	0.08
Item 25	23	8	0.34
Total	184	89	3.83
Total Mean Score			0.48

From the table above, it can be seen that the mean score of item 3 is 0.56, item 5 is 0.47, item 8 is 0.60, item 11 is 0.82, item 14 is 0.78, item 19 is 0.17, item 20 is 0.08, and item 25 is 0.34. In conclusion, the total mean score of student's used simple present tense in verbal sentences type II is 0.48.

3. Formula III

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Sum	Mean
Item 4	23	13	0.56
Item 6	23	18	0.78
Item 7	23	10	0.43
Item 12	23	16	0.69
Item 13	23	20	0.86
Item 18	23	6	0.26
Item 22	23	3	0.13
Item 24	23	0	0
Total	184	86	3.17
Total Mean Score			0.40

From the table above, it can be seen that the mean score of item 4 is 0.56, item 6 is 0.78, item 7 is 0.43, item 12 is 0.69, item 13 is 0.86, item 18 is 0.26, item 22 is 0.13, and item 24 is 0. In conclusion, the total mean score of the simple present tense in verbal sentences type III is 0.40.

The writer also described the dominant formula of simple present tense in verbal sentences as follows:

No	Formulas	Mean Score
1	Formula I	0.52
2	Formula II	0.48
3	Formula III	0.40

Table 4.5 The Dominant Formulas of Simple Present Tense in Verbal Sentences

From the table above, it can be seen the dominant formula of simple present tense in verbal sentences mastered by students of SMP Bandar Klippa Academic Year 2023/2024 is formula I, the mean score is 0.52.

The writer also presented the percentage of the dominant type of simple present tense in verbal sentences as follows:

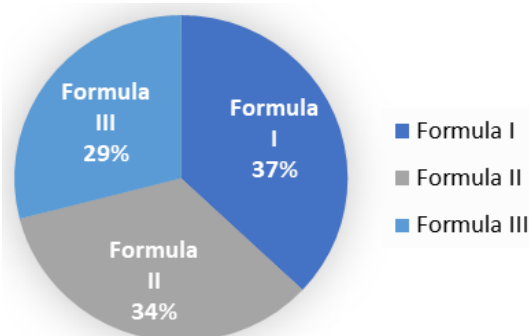


Chart 4.3 The Percentage of the Dominant Formula of Simple Present tense in Verbal Sentences

From the chart above, it can be seen that the percentage of formula I is 37%, formula II is 29%, and formula III is 34%. So, the dominant formula of students' ability in using simple present tense in verbal sentences at SMP Bandar Klippa Academic Year 2023/2024 is "formula I" with the percentage of 37%.

4.2. Sub Topic 2

This session discusses the findings presented in the previous section. It examines the results related to the two statements of the problem, comparing them with previous research and relevant literature on students' ability to use the simple present tense in verbal sentences.

a. How is the student's ability to using simple present tense in verbal sentences?

The findings reveal that students' ability used the simple present tense in verbal sentences falls into the "fail", where the mean of students' scores is 49,56. Although nearly half of them are rated at the "less" level of ability. This indicates that the teaching and learning process for simple present tense sentences at SMP Bandar Klippa during the 2023/2024 academic year is severely lacking.

b. What is the dominant formula of simple present tense in verbal sentences?

The data findings indicate that the dominant formula of simple present tense in verbal sentences by students at SMP Bandar Klippa is "Formula I," with the highest mean score is 0.52 or the percentage is 37%. In contrast, "Formula III" had the lowest mean score is 0.40 or the percentage is 29%.

5. Conclusion

This study examined students' mastery of the simple present tense in verbal sentences at SMP Bandar Klippa, Kecamatan Percut Sei Tuan, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, North Sumatra, during the 2023/2024 academic year. The research specifically focused on students' ability to construct positive, negative, and interrogative forms, as well as identifying the most dominant formula used.

The findings revealed that the students' overall mastery of the simple present tense falls into the "fail" category, with a mean score of 49.56. This result indicates that students' understanding and application of simple present tense structures remain below the expected competency level set by the national curriculum. Among the three grammatical forms analyzed, Formula I (positive sentences) was found to be the most dominant, with a mean score of 0.52 or 37%, suggesting that students perform better in constructing affirmative statements than in forming negative or interrogative sentences.

These findings highlight persistent challenges in grammar instruction, particularly in helping students internalize structural differences and apply them communicatively. Therefore, it is recommended that English teachers adopt more contextualized, interactive, and communicative approaches to teaching grammar. Incorporating real-life examples, peer interaction, and task-based learning activities may enhance students' grammatical competence and promote greater fluency in both written and spoken English.

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