

**CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS IN  
MASTERING ENGLISH TENSE USAGE**

*Nasritdinov Olimjon Umarjonovich*

*English teacher of NamAL of the MIA*

[Olimnasritdinov0@gmail.com](mailto:Olimnasritdinov0@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *This study investigates the persistent challenges that B1+ (intermediate) level learners encounter in mastering English verb tense usage. Drawing from classroom-based research, learner interviews, and performance analysis, the paper identifies major difficulties related to tense selection, form accuracy, contextual use, and first language (L1) interference. Key findings indicate that while learners often display theoretical understanding of tense rules, they struggle to apply them consistently in real-time communication. The study emphasizes the need for a more communicative, context-rich, and integrative approach to grammar instruction. Recommendations include blending explicit instruction with task-based learning and incorporating more formative feedback to support learners in acquiring tense accuracy and fluency.*

**Keywords:** *English tenses, intermediate learners, B1+, grammar instruction, L1 interference, tense acquisition, communicative approach*

**Introduction**

English verb tenses are among the most complex aspects of grammar for learners at the B1+ level. Despite years of instruction, many intermediate students exhibit difficulties in using tenses accurately, particularly when speaking or writing in authentic contexts. The problem is widespread, affecting learners across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The importance of tense usage lies not only in grammatical correctness but also in its role in conveying meaning, time, and intention. Effective use of tenses enables clarity and precision, which are essential for successful communication.



This paper examines why tense mastery remains elusive for intermediate EFL learners. It reviews existing literature on second language acquisition (SLA), focuses on specific tense-related challenges, and analyzes primary data collected from a group of B1+ students. The study also explores the pedagogical implications of these findings and suggests strategies for addressing the challenges.

### **Literature Review**

Tense acquisition has been a central focus in SLA research for decades. Scholars such as Ellis (2006) and Bardovi-Harlig (2000) emphasize that acquiring tense forms involves not just memorization of rules, but an understanding of how those forms function in discourse. Research indicates that learners often acquire simpler tenses, such as the present simple and past simple, before mastering more complex forms like the present perfect or conditional tenses (Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

A significant factor influencing tense acquisition is the learner's first language. In contexts like Uzbekistan, where the native language (Uzbek) does not mark time in the same way as English, learners may struggle to grasp the nuances of English tense systems. Furthermore, traditional grammar teaching in many EFL settings prioritizes form over function, which can result in learners who know the rules but cannot apply them effectively.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) are often recommended to address these issues. These methods emphasize meaningful interaction and real-life tasks, which can help learners internalize tense use more effectively than isolated drills (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

Recent studies have expanded our understanding of how learners acquire tense through technology-enhanced methods. For example, Li and Hegelheimer (2013) found that using mobile applications with interactive feedback significantly improved learners' ability to use past and present perfect tenses in context. Similarly, Chan (2018) highlighted the effectiveness of corpus-based tools in helping students notice patterns of tense usage in authentic texts.

Moreover, research by Muranoi (2000) demonstrated that form-focused instruction combined with communicative practice leads to better long-term retention



of tense forms compared to instruction that is either purely deductive or purely communicative. According to Norris and Ortega (2000), explicit grammar instruction, when embedded in meaning-oriented activities, can be highly effective, especially for intermediate-level learners who are ready to integrate form and meaning.

These insights support a balanced approach to grammar teaching that includes metalinguistic explanation, structured practice, and frequent opportunities for meaningful use. This study seeks to build on these findings by examining how they apply in an Uzbekistani academic lyceum context.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative and descriptive research design to investigate the challenges faced by intermediate (B1+) learners in mastering English tense usage. The research was conducted in an academic lyceum in Uzbekistan, where English is taught as a foreign language. The aim was to analyze not only the types of errors students make but also the pedagogical and psychological factors contributing to these difficulties.

The participants of the study included 25 B1+ level students (aged 16–17) enrolled in the second year of an academic lyceum. These students had studied English for at least five years and had completed basic grammar instruction. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, as the study specifically targeted learners who were at an intermediate level and actively engaged in academic English courses. In addition to students, three English language teachers with more than five years of teaching experience were also involved in the study to provide insight into classroom practices, instructional strategies, and observed challenges related to tense usage.

To gather comprehensive and reliable data, the following research instruments were used:

**Grammar-focused diagnostic test:** A 40-item test assessing learners' use of tenses in both controlled (gap-fill, sentence correction) and open-ended (writing prompts) tasks.

**Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with students and teachers to explore perceptions about tense learning, difficulties encountered, and teaching strategies.





Classroom observation checklist: Used to monitor teaching practices, error correction, and student engagement with tense-related tasks during regular lessons.

Writing samples: Collected from students' classwork and homework to analyze tense accuracy and usage in extended discourse.

The study was conducted over a period of four weeks. In the first week, the diagnostic grammar test was administered to all student participants. In the following two weeks, classroom observations were conducted during English grammar and speaking lessons, with particular focus on how tenses were taught and practiced.

In week three, semi-structured interviews were held. Students were asked questions such as:

Which tenses do you find most difficult and why?

Do you feel confident using tenses in speaking and writing?

How do your teachers help you learn tenses effectively?

Teachers were interviewed about their instructional strategies, use of corrective feedback, and perceptions of student progress.

Finally, students' recent writing assignments were collected and analyzed to triangulate the findings from the test and interviews.

The data gathered were analyzed using content analysis and error analysis methods. The diagnostic tests were scored and categorized according to tense error types (e.g., tense shift, omission, overuse, misinformation). Interview transcripts were coded thematically to identify recurring ideas and concerns regarding tense usage. Observational data were summarized to evaluate the alignment between instructional practice and learners' performance.

Writing samples were also evaluated using an analytic rubric focusing on grammatical accuracy, appropriateness of tense usage, and variety of structures.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their academic standing would not be affected by their performance in the study.



### **Discussion**

The results of the study reveal several significant insights into the challenges intermediate (B1+) learners face in mastering English tense usage. These findings not only reflect issues common across EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, but also highlight some unique aspects of the Uzbek academic lyceum setting.

First and foremost, learners' confusion between similar tense forms—particularly between the past simple and present perfect—was the most frequently observed error. For example, students often said, “I have seen him yesterday,” instead of using the correct past simple form, “I saw him yesterday.” This confusion likely stems from a combination of limited explicit instruction on usage contexts and the structural differences between English and Uzbek. In Uzbek, the aspectual difference between a completed action with or without a specific time reference does not exist, making it harder for learners to internalize English distinctions.

In addition, learners showed consistent difficulty using progressive tenses, particularly the present perfect continuous and past continuous, especially in narrative or descriptive writing. When asked to describe ongoing past events, many students defaulted to past simple structures. This avoidance may be a result of inadequate practice opportunities that focus on extended discourse, such as storytelling, journaling, or project-based speaking tasks. This supports Ellis's (2003) view that tense mastery requires not just rule memorization, but context-sensitive application over time.

Another observation is that even when learners understood the rules of tense usage in isolation (e.g., through fill-in-the-gap exercises), they failed to transfer this knowledge into real-time speaking or extended writing. This reflects a gap between declarative and procedural knowledge. According to DeKeyser (2007), the proceduralization of grammar rules requires frequent and varied practice under communicative conditions. In many classrooms, however, grammar remains confined to discrete-point drills, which do not build fluency or automaticity.

Furthermore, the study revealed that many learners rely heavily on translation strategies when constructing English sentences. This L1-dependence can distort tense



choices. For instance, the Uzbek sentence “Men uni kecha ko‘rganman” can be translated as either “I saw him yesterday” or “I have seen him yesterday,” depending on a learner’s interpretation. Without explicit contrastive grammar instruction, such confusion persists.

One key pedagogical implication is that grammar instruction must be more integrative and communicative. Tense usage should be embedded into activities that require learners to talk or write about real or imagined events. Role-plays, information gap tasks, time-sequenced storytelling, and guided peer interviews can provide such opportunities. When learners use tenses in meaningful exchanges, they begin to understand not just how to form them, but when and why to use them. Affective variables also played a significant role. Some students demonstrated avoidance behavior, choosing to speak or write in simpler tenses they were more confident in, even when more complex structures were required. This supports Krashen’s (1985) affective filter hypothesis, which posits that anxiety and low self-confidence can inhibit language acquisition. Instructors must work to create a low-stress, supportive environment that encourages experimentation and risk-taking with language.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined the common difficulties B1+ learners face in mastering English tense usage. Despite having a theoretical understanding of tense forms, many students struggle to use them accurately in real-life communication, particularly due to first language interference, limited communicative practice, and affective factors such as anxiety or lack of confidence.

The research highlights that grammar instruction should not be limited to rule memorization or controlled exercises. Instead, it should integrate contextualized practice, meaningful communication, and regular feedback to help learners internalize tense usage more effectively. Incorporating authentic materials, contrastive analysis, and technology-based tools can further enhance this process.

In conclusion, improving tense accuracy at the intermediate level requires a balanced approach that addresses both the cognitive and emotional needs of learners.





A well-rounded methodology can foster not only grammatical precision but also greater fluency and confidence in language use.

English tense usage remains a significant challenge for intermediate EFL learners due to a combination of linguistic, instructional, and psychological factors. The study suggests that more contextualized, communicative grammar instruction is needed to help learners internalize tense forms and use them fluently.

Future research could explore the long-term effects of different instructional approaches on tense mastery. Additionally, developing digital tools and mobile applications tailored to local learners' needs could support independent learning and reinforce classroom instruction.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2000). *Tense and Aspect in Second Language Acquisition: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Blackwell.
2. Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*. Heinle & Heinle.
3. Ellis, R. (2006). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
4. Larsen-Freeman, D. (2001). Teaching Grammar. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (pp. 251–266). Heinle & Heinle.
5. Nassaji, H., & Fotos, S. (2011). *Teaching Grammar in Second Language Classrooms: Integrating Form-Focused Instruction in Communicative Contexts*. Routledge.
6. Swan, M. (2005). *Practical English Usage* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.