

# THE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF PRESENT PERFECT FORM OF THE SECOND SEMESTER STUDENTS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION

Oleh: I Luh Meiyana Ariss Susanti<sup>1</sup>

## Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui permasalahan/ kendala mahasiswa semester dua STKIP Agama Hindu (AH) Singaraja dalam memahami dan menggunakan *Present Perfect*. Untuk memperoleh tujuan penelitian tersebut, para mahasiswa semester dua STKIP Agama Hindu (AH) Singaraja diberikan tugas untuk menjawab tes. Duabelas mahasiswa yang memperoleh skor diantara 35-50 dipilih menjadi subjek penelitian. Hasil tes menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan yang dihadapi subjek bervariasi terkait dengan makna yang terkandung dalam bentuk *perfect* tertentu. Hasil tes tersebut juga menunjukkan pilihan para subjek dalam menggunakan bentuk lain untuk mengemukakan makna yang hanya benar dalam bentuk *present perfect*. Bentuk-bentuk tersebut adalah *simple past* dan *simple present*. Hasilnya juga menunjukkan bahwa para mahasiswa yang nampaknya memiliki kemampuan sama tidak selalu memiliki kesulitan yang sama dalam item tata bahasa tertentu, misalnya *present perfect tense*.

**Kata kunci:** kesulitan siswa, Grammar, *present perfect*

## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP Agama Hindu (AH) Singaraja problems in understanding and using the present perfect. To achieve that purpose the second grade students of English Department of STKIP AH Singaraja were requested to do completion tests. Twelve of them, who have final score 35 - 50, were selected as subjects. From the result of the completion test indicates students' difficulties seem to vary in accordance with what meaning a certain perfect form carries. forms to express meaning which can only be correctly expressed in the present perfect forms. Those forms are simple past and simple present. The results also seem to indicate that students seemingly equal knowledge do not necessarily have equal difficulties in a certain grammar item, i.e. the present perfect. The results also seem to indicate students' preference in using other.

**Keywords:** *students' difficulties, English grammar, present perfect*

---

<sup>1</sup> I Luh Meiyana Ariss Susanti is a lecturer of English Education in STKIP Agama Hindu Singaraja

## INTRODUCTION

There have been studies on the role of first language to second language acquisition (Odlin, 1989:15-16). It is “a popular belief that second language is strongly influenced by the learner’s first language (Ellis, 1985:19). It may be possible and understandable that many learners carry first language rules in their effort to learn the present perfect, which may partly contribute to learners’ difficulties. Learners difficulties may likely be caused by the following factors: a) The Indonesian language expresses the English perfect with and without the aspect **sudah**; b) In certain present perfect meaning, i.e. resultative past, the use of **sudah** is compulsory. In other meaning, it is not obligatory; c) The definite adverbial of time such as on Wednesday, yesterday, last year are never used with the present perfect in English. In Indonesian, those definite adverbials of time can be used comfortably in the **sudah** + **verb** construction, which is equivalent to the present perfect.

Considering the complex systems of the English perfect, the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP AH Singaraja mostly will have problems understanding and using the Present Perfect. Three hypothesis will be put forward: a) Students may find almost relatively equal difficulties to use and interpret the four meanings of the present perfect; b) Students will be mostly tempted to replace the Present Prefect with the Simple Past and the Simple Present Tense; c) Students will find more difficulties when a certain Present Perfect carries certain meaning without the presence of distinct adverbials. Based on three hypotheses, the writer will conduct the study in the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP AH Singaraja.

Based on the above phenomena, the research problem can be formulated as follows:

- (1) Why the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP AH Singaraja have difficulties in using and interpreting the four meanings of the present perfect?
- (2) Why the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP AH Singaraja tempt to replace the Present Prefect with the Simple Past and the Simple Present Tense?
- (3). Why the second semester students of English EducationDepartment of STKIP AH Singaraja have difficulties when certain Present Perfect carries certain meaning without the presence of distinct adverbials?

## Theoretical Review

The various languages of the world are structured based on many different patterns at the levels of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Finegan, 1992: 200). Indonesian and English share the common basic structure of the basic clause. The two languages’ sentences

follow the order subject-verb-direct object (Finegan, 1992:214). Despite the similarities, the two languages also have differences in many aspects. The second segment in the sentence formula, the verb, provides clear examples of how the two languages resemble and differ from each other.

Verbs can be studied and classified in different ways. Quirk and Greebaum (1973:26), prior to discussion of verb forms and verb phases, distinguish the English verbs into Lexical Verbs (LV) such as **walk**, **write**, **play**, **beautify**, and Auxiliary Verbs (AV). The auxiliary verbs are further subdivided into Primary Auxiliary Verbs (PAV) such as **do**, **have**, **be** and Modal Auxiliary Verbs (MAV) such as **can**, **may**, **shall**, **will**, **could**, **might**, **should**, **would**, **must**, **ought to**, **used to**, **need**, and **dare**. Grammarians have so far studied auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs, and how they can be combined (Thompson A.J. and Martinet, A.V., 1980:89-184).

Verbs in Indonesian can also be grouped in different ways. Moeliono M. (1988:128-129) describes that Indonesian verbs phrases are comprised of Main Verbs (MV) and Verb Modifiers (VM). Verb modifiers may be placed before verbs as front verb modifiers (FVM), and after the main verbs as rear verb modifiers (RVM). Examples of front verb modifiers (FVM) are **akan** (will, shall, would), **harus** (must, have to, had to), **dapat** (can, could, to be able to), **mau** (will, would), **akan harus** (will have to, would have to), **harus mau** (must be willing to), **akan mau** (will be willing to). Examples of Rear Verb Modifiers (RVM) are **lagi** (again) and **kembali** (back). In Indonesian there are also words called aspects (A) such as **sudah** for perfective aspect and **sedang** for progressive aspect (Moeliono, 1988: 129).

Indonesian and English verb phrases have relatively similar constructions. An English verb phrases may consist of a main verb, or of one or more auxiliary verbs with a main verb (Leech and Svartvik, 1975: 303 – 304). An Indonesian verb phrases may consist of a main verb plus another word modifying the main verb (Moeliono, 1988: 128). The difference perhaps lies in terminology. A lexical verb after a subject can be regarded as a verb phrases in English (Leech and Svartvik, 1989: 303), while in Indonesian it cannot be so. Moeliono (1988: 127) defines a verb phrases as a combination of two words or more, one of which must be a main verb and the combination must not form a clause.

Of all the various meanings behind the forms of verb phrases, perhaps it is the verb phrase of the Primary Auxiliary Verb **have** plus a **Lexical Verb** in the past participles form called the Present perfect tense which provides most complex and diverse meanings. Leech (1987: 36) writes that it is too vague to tell exactly the when and when not to use present

perfect. Michaelis (1994: 111) discusses the ambiguous uses of the present perfect. Quirk, et al. (1972: 91) for instance, state that ‘the present perfect indicates a period of time stretching backwards into some earlier time. It is the past with ‘current relevance’.

McCoard (1978:11) claims that the English perfect has frequently been placed in the category of aspect, partly because of the persistent connection between the perfect and meanings of completion or result. He further asserts that these meanings of completion and result are not actually intrinsic to the perfect, rather they come from an interaction with other elements of the linguistic and general pragmatic concepts. Concerning the function of present perfect, McCoard (1978:11) state that the defining function of perfect in English is to express the pastness of the event(s) embodied in the lexical verb, together with a certain applicability, pertinence, or relevance of said past event(s) to the context of coding. Leech (1989: 382) provides further information concerning the main uses of the present perfect. It is explained that the present perfect is used with **for** and **since** to talk about something with began in the past and has not changed. It is also used with **ever** or **never** to talk about general experience, i.e: what have you done in your life up to now. With **just**, it is used to talk about recent events. Events whose results are still noticeable can also be expressed in the present perfect, especially the present perfect progressive.

Certain sentences in the perfect forms carry specific meanings (Leech, 1989: 381). **I have studied English since I started secondary school** implies the meaning that I began to study English in the past and at the moment I am still studying. In the sentence **I have visited Sydney but I never been to Perth** indicates my experience of not having never been to Perth despite my having been to Sydney. A more recent experience is expressed in the present perfect with **just** as in **I've just had a delicious meal**. In the present perfect, there is a relationship between past and present. In fact, it is known that the ways of indicating past is by the past tense. The perfect aspect is used for a past happening which is seen in relation to a later event or time (Leech, 1987: 35).

Comparing the present perfect in English with that of the Indonesian language may be able to reveal meaning differences. It is perhaps the comparison of strong perfective markedness in English with a lesser one in Indonesian. It is also the comparison of seemingly intricate and complicated meanings in English with the relatively less complicated ones in Indonesia. It is the comparison of two languages which may not share common understanding that the present perfect, as distinct from the simple past tense, is often described as referring to past with present relevance, or past involving the present.

The study of the present perfect will not seem to be very effective without first addressing the differences between stative (state) and dynamic (event) verb. English verb are commonly categorized into state and event verbs (Leech, 1987), while in Indonesian there are three verbs categories (Moeliono, 1988:77) i.e. **kata kerja proses** (process verb), **kata kerja perbuatan** (action verb), **kata kerja keadaan** (situation verb). The verbs **to run**, **to take** are event verb in English (action verb in Indonesian). **To study**, **to live** are stative verbs (process verb in Indonesian), and **to like**, **to love** are verbs of the senses are classified as situation verb in Indonesia.

Leech (1987:36-40) claims that the perfect may involve a time period lasting into the present and have results persisting at the present time. The various forms of perfect in English may mean the following:

- a. State-up-to-the-present. With ‘state verbs’ present involvement means that the state extends over a period lasting up to the present moment.
- b. Indefinite Past (IP). With ‘event verbs’, the present perfect may refer to some indefinite happening in the past.
- c. Habit-in-period-leading-up-to-the-present (HUP). The habitual or iterative use of the present perfect with ‘event verbs’ is illustrated by the following sentences **“I have always walked to work”** with the Indonesian equivalent **“Saya – selalu berjalan untuk kerja”**.
- d. Resultative Past (RP). The Present Perfect is also used in reference to a past event to imply that the result of that event is still operative at the present time. This result can particularly be seen with the verbs of movement and transitional event verbs.

McCoard (1987: 31) presents an example of the difference between **“he’s gone to bed”** and **“he went to bed.”** It is said that former indicates that he is still in the bed at that time of utterance, whereas the later doesn’t support such understanding. In Indonesian, the two sentences do not have difference verb phrase forms, i.e. **“Dia sudah pergi tidur”**. In the example below, (1) has equivalent meaning with both (2) and (3).

- (1) He **has gone** to bed.
- (2) He **went** to bed.
- (3) Dia **sudah pergi** tidur.

The resultative use of the Present Perfect (4) is shown in contrast to Simple Past (6) in the examples below:

- (4) Peter **has broken** the expensive glass.
- (5) Peter **sudah memecahkan** gelas mahal itu.

(6) Peter **broke** the expensive glass.

(7) Peter **memecahkan** gelas mahal itu

In English, the Present Perfect is used when the past which in its indefinite past tense, does not name a specific point of time (8). The Simple Past Tense is used when there is a definite point of orientation in the past (11).

(8) I have seen him. I came to borrow a book.

(9) Saya sudah melihat dia. Dia datang untuk meminjam buku.

(10) Saya melihat dia. Dia datang untuk meminjam buku.

(11) I met him on Wednesday.

(12) Saya bertemu dengannya hari Rabu.

(13) Saya sudah bertemu dengannya hari Rabu.

(14) I have seen him on Wednesday. (\*)

In the examples above, the Indonesian sentences (9), (10), (11), (13) are equivalent of both English Present Perfect and Simple Past Tense. The Present Perfect (14) is, however, incorrect and incompatible with the simple past tense (11).

## Methodology

The purpose of the study was to investigate the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP AH Singaraja problems in understanding and using the present perfect. To achieve that purpose the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP AH Singaraja were requested to do completion tests. Twelve of them, who have final score scores 35 - 45, were selected as subjects. The test consisted of two parts. For Part A the students were required to fill in the blank spaces with the correct verb forms. The item had been designed in such way that they cover the four meanings of the present perfect discussed in the theoretical review. For Part B, the students were requested to translate Indonesian sentences into English. Some words were given to help and guide the students' thinking of form usage in English.

The completed test of Part A was grouped based on the meaning background using certain codes. For ease in reading, the codes were rewritten in ordinary tables. They were table 1 to 10. Tentative interpretation and exploration on students' problems in understanding of using present perfect would be based on the results of both parts of the completion tests.

## Finding and Discussion

Table 1 – 10 illustrate the result of the completion test. Tables 3, 5, 7 show the students give more incorrect answers than correct ones. Table 1 indicates that students give more correct answers than wrong ones in the present perfect meaning “state-up-to-the-present”. Tables 2, 4, 6, 8 illustrate what inappropriate forms the students have used in place of the present perfect. Table 9 illustrates the result for the completion test part B, where the students were required to translate Indonesian sentences into English. Table 10 shows the students’ correct answers based on individual items of the completion test part A. The discussion which follows the illustration of results focuses on interpreting why the students seem to find more problems with the present perfect with certain meanings.

### 1 Meaning: State-up-to-the-Present

Table 1. Subjects’ Correct and Wrong Answers

Students’ Answers	Numbers	Percentage
Correct	28	58.3%
Wrong	20	41.7%
Total	48	100%

As we can be seen from table 1, the students give 20 wrong answers out of 48. Table 2 below shows the students’ wrong answer consist of various other forms, mainly simple present, simple past, and present continuous. The students also complete the test using verb phrases which are grammatically unacceptable, such as he gone, radio station broadcasting, my father gone, she has been a major in social work, she is major in social work, the mechanics have been serviced.

Table 2. Inappropriate forms in Subjects’ Wrong Answers

Subjects’ Forms	Numbers	Percentage
Simple Past	6	30%
Simple Present	7	35%
Present Continuous	5	25%
Past Perfect	1	5%
Ungrammatical	1	5%
Total	20	100%

### 2 Meaning: Indefinite Past

Table 3. Percentage of Subjects’ Correct and Wrong Answers

Students’ Answers	Numbers	Percentage
Correct	19	39.6%
Wrong	29	60.4%

Total	48	100%
-------	----	------

Table 3 shows that the students give 29 wrong answers in the present perfect meaning “Indefinite Past”, 19 of which, as table 4 shows are in the simple past. This seems to indicate that students do not quite understand that the two forms, i.e. the present perfect and the simple past, express different meanings.

Table 4. Percentage Inappropriate forms in Subjects’ Wrong Answers

Subjects’ Forms	Numbers	Percentage
Simple Past	19	65.50%
Simple Present	4	13.80%
Present Continuous	2	6.90%
Past Continuous	1	3.45%
Ungrammatical	1	3.45%
No answer	2	6.90%
Total	29	100%

### **3 Meaning: Habit-in-Period-Leading-Up-To-The-Present**

Table 5. Percentage of Subjects’ Correct and Wrong Answers

Students’ Answers	Numbers	Percentage
Correct	16	33.46%
Wrong	32	66.54%
Total	48	100%

Table 6. Percentage Inappropriate forms in Subjects’ Wrong Answers

Subjects’ Forms	Numbers	Percentage
Simple Past	8	25%
Simple Present	12	37.50%
Present Continuous	4	12.50%
Past Continuous	1	3.25%
Ungrammatical	6	18.75%
No answer	1	3.25%
Total	32	100%

Table 5 shows that the students only give 16 correct answers, while the incorrect ones total 32. As shown in table 6, out of 32 wrong answers, 12 are in the simple present, and 8 in the simple past. It is a phenomenon which needs to be explored. There must be reasons as to why students associate the present perfect meaning ‘Habit-in-period-up-to-the present’ with the simple present and simple past.

### **4 Meaning: Resultative Past**

Table 7. Percentage of Subjects’ Correct and Wrong Answers

Students’ Answers	Numbers	Percentage
Correct	8	16.7%
Wrong	40	83.3%
Total	48	100%



Table 7 shows that students give 40 wrong answers, with only 8 answers correct. As compared with tables 3 and 5, students make many mistakes in the present perfect meaning ‘resultative past’. The present perfect ‘resultative past’ seems to be most difficult one to understand. Table 8 shows that out of 40 incorrect answers, 16 are in the simple past and 15 in the simple present.

Table 8. Percentage Inappropriate forms in Subjects’ Wrong Answers

Subjects’ Forms	Numbers	Percentage
Simple Past	16	40%
Simple Present	15	37.50%
Present Continuous	1	2.50%
Past Perfect	2	5%
Ungrammatical	5	12.50%
No answer	1	2.50%
Total	40	100%

Table 9 below shows that students find most difficulty in translating Indonesian sentences having resultative past meaning into English. In items number 3, for example, there is only 1 correct answer out of 12. Students seem to have less difficulty translating a sentence with State-up-to-the-present meaning (10 correct answers out of 12).

Table 9 Result of Translation Test

No	Intended Meaning	Correct answers	Percentage	Wrong answers	Percentage
1	State up to present	10	83.3%	2	16.7%
2	Habit in period leading up to the present	4	33.3%	8	66.7%
3	Resultative Past	1	8.3%	11	91.7%
4	Resultative Past	6	50%	6	50%
5	Indefinite Past	4	33.3%	8	66.7%
6	Indefinite Past	3	25%	9	75%
7	Resultative Past	2	16.7%	10	83.3%
8	Resultative Past	3	25%	9	75%
9	Resultative Past	6	50%	6	50%
10	Indefinite Past	6	50%	6	50%
	Total	45	100%	75	100%

Students have to complete blank space with the right verbs forms in the completion test part A, and their performance on individual items can be seen in table below. When completed properly, number 1, 5, 9, 13 have the meaning of state-up-to-the-present; number 2, 6, 10, 14 express the meaning of indefinite past; number 3, 7, 11, 15 have habit-in-period-leading-up-to-the-present; and number 4, 8, 12, 16 carry the meaning of resultative past. Table

10 seems to indicate that students likely find more difficulties in certain items. It can be tentatively interpreted that the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP AH Singaraja find the present perfect with resultative past (8 correct answers out of 48) the most difficult to understand. The present with state-up-to-the-present causes least difficulties (28 correct answers out of 48). The present perfect expressing indefinite past meaning (19 correct answers out of 48) and habit-in-period-leading-up-to-the-present (16 correct answers out of 48) seems to cause moderate difficulties to students.

Table 10. Students correct answers on individual item

Item No.	Correct Answers	Meaning	Total Correct answers out of 48 and %
01	9	State-up-to-the-Present	28 / 58.34%
05	8	Ibid.	
09	3	Ibid.	
13	8	Ibid.	
02	8	Indefinite Past	
06	2	Indefinite Past	19 / 39.58%
10	6	Indefinite Past	
14	3	Indefinite Past	
03	3	Habit-in-Period-leading-up-to-the-Present	
07	2	Ibid.	16 / 33.33%
11	7	Ibid.	
15	4	Ibid.	
04	1	Resultative Past.	8 / 16.66 %
08	2	Ibid.	
12	4	Ibid.	
16	1	Ibid.	

Table 9 and 10 seem to support this interpretation. This means the finding likely contradicts the first hypothesis, which predicts students may have equal difficulties in understanding and using the four meanings of the present perfect. Tables 2, 4, 6, 8 show that students use different tense in place of the present perfect. Students use simple past 49 times, simple present 38 times, and present continuous 12 times. It is difficult to analyze why students use the present continuous which actually is not directly related to the present perfect. The fact students' use the present continuous twelve times does not support the second hypothesis, either.

Table 9 and 10 provide information that the present perfect with resultative past meaning is the most difficult of all. In both tables, only one student out of twelve gives the right answer, i.e. item number 3 in table 9 and number 4 in table 10. Table 9 is the result of completion test or part B and table 10 is the individual result of completion test. As we can see in the test, items 3 and 4 do not have clear time signals or adverbials which may guide students to choosing the perfect form. This finding supports the third hypothesis which claims

that students will find more difficulty when a certain present perfect carries certain meaning without the presence of adverbials.

In general, the findings seem to support what Felix has found (1980:107). He writes that 'our data on L2 acquisition of syntactic structures in natural environment suggest that interference does not constitute a major study in this area'. The findings also seem to justify the study of Whitman and Jackson (1972) who obtained no support for contrastive analyses, so carefully worked out by linguists. The findings may also conclude that contrastive analyses between the present perfect Indonesian and English should not necessarily be the most reliable means of predicating students' difficulties. However, the study may benefit to teachers of English, at least understand the areas of difficulties their students may face. Moreover, in this particular case, Lado's ideas may still be relevant that the teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real problems are and can better teach them (Lado, 1957). Other aspects may need to be taken into consideration as many of the errors might not be directly linked to students' first language.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the results and discussion, the conclusion may be tentatively drawn that students experience difficulties. The difficulties may be ranked in order, i.e. not so difficult (present perfect expressing state-up-to-the-present), difficult (present perfect expressing indefinite past and habit-in-period-leading-to-the-present), and very difficult (present perfect expressing resultative past).

The study of the students' problems in understanding and using the present perfect in English especially the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP Agama Hindu Singaraja offers some interesting perspective. The result of the completion test indicates students' difficulties seem to vary in accordance with what meaning a certain perfect form carries. The results also seem to indicate students' preference in using other forms to express meaning which can only be correctly expressed in the present perfect forms. Those forms are simple past and simple present. The results also seem to indicate that students seemingly equal knowledge do not necessarily have equal difficulties in a certain grammar item, i.e. the present perfect.

This study is very limited in its scope, size and data. The interpretation of the results consequently cannot be more reliably conducted. The study will be more reliable if students are asked to explain as to why they have decided to use other forms instead of the present

perfect. If interviews can be held, a clearer picture concerning to the first language influence on students decisions in choosing the wrong forms may be able to be detected. This limited study may possibly be used as a stepping stone for further study. Future studies may consider enlarging the subjects, improving the completion test with more items of other than present perfect, by asking subjects to provide reasons for making certain form choices, and making use of more helpful statistics. Findings of the study covering wider scope, size and data might be much more useful and reliable.

## REFERENCES

- Eliss, R. 1985. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Felix, S. 1980. *Second Language Development*. Tübingen: Gunther Narr.
- Finegan, Edward et al. 1992. *Language Its Structure and Use*. Marricksville, NSW: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Group (Australia) Pty Ltd.
- Lado, R. 1957. *Linguistics Across Culture: Applied Linguistics for language Teachers*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan.
- Leech, G. and J. Svartvik. 1975. *A communicative Grammar of English*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G. 1987. *Meaning and the English verb*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G. 1989. *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage*. Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.
- McCoard, Robert W. 1987. *The English Perfect: tense-choice and pragmatic inferences*. Amsterdam: North Holland Linguistic Series.
- Michaelis, Laura A. 1994. "The ambiguity of the English Present Perfect". In *Journal of Linguistics*.
- Moeliono, M. 1989. *Tata Bahasa Baku Bahasa Indonesia*. Jakarta Perum Balai Pustaka.
- Odlin, Terence. 1989. *Language Transfer-Cross Linguistics Transfer Influence in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Quirk, Randolph et al. 1972. *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. London: Logma Group Limited.
- Quirk, Randolph and Sidney Grrrenbaum. 1973. *A University Grammar of English*. Harlow: ELBS and Longman Group Limited.
- Whitman, Randal L, and Jackson, Kenneth L. 1972. *The Unpredictability of Contrastive Analysis. Language Learning : Language learning (22-41)*.