

# A Corpus-based Study of the Misuse of Tenses in the English Composition of Chinese College Students

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## Abstract

Chinese Students' English has its own characteristics. It is of significance to analyze and study these characteristics. The paper uses the corpus approach to study the misuse of tenses in Chinese College students' CET-4 compositions of the sub-corpus of "Non-major College Students" in the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC). Nine types of misuse are identified, and analysis is made of the causes of each type. It is found that the misuse of tenses in Chinese college students' English compositions is mainly in the simple present tense and the simple past tense; the wrong collocation of tenses is mostly in the kind of complex sentence with the main clause and subordinate clause both indicating the future action and the subordinate clause using the simple present tense; as for the two special words "could" and "would" with both declarative and subjunctive usages, Chinese students often get confused and misuse them; students have vague understanding of the time concept indicated by the different tenses. Based on the analysis, the author tentatively provide some interpretations for these mistakes: many problems exist in the teaching of grammar in Chinese English teaching, and the teaching of tenses is not systematic and the focus of teaching and tests is not in accordance with the actual uses of tenses; students are affected by inter-lingual transfer and intra-lingual transfer when making English sentences. At last, some suggestions are offered by the author for the teaching of tenses: teachers should combine systematic teaching of tenses with the teaching of tenses in actual contexts and students should try to write English compositions using different tenses.

**Keywords:** Chinese learners, English writing, Corpus, Error analysis, Tenses

## 1. Introduction

The errors and mistakes (abbreviated as errors only in the following part) committed by foreign language learners in the course of study are a universal concern of linguists and teachers of foreign languages. Tense is a main and difficult point to master for Chinese students of English. On the one hand, it is difficult for Chinese students to understand and accept the concept of tense owing to the fact that there is no tense in the Chinese language; on the other hand, there are altogether 16 tenses in English, each having more than one usages, so Chinese students are always confused with the various usages of different tenses. The article is intended to observe, classify and summarize these errors in the use of tenses in Chinese students' compositions, with the purpose of finding some regularity in them, analyzing the causes of these errors and proposing some suggestions for the teaching of tenses.

One point is worth special mention here. The concept of tense discussed here is the concept of tense in traditional English grammar, namely, the combination of tense and aspect. For the purpose of economy, tense is used throughout the article for the concept of the combination of tense and aspect.

## 2. Research Method

This research is based on the Chinese Students' CET-4 compositions of the sub-corpus of "Non-major College Students" in the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC), approximately 15 000 words. The concordance software ConcApp is used to search for the tense errors tagged by Vp6 and altogether 343 lines are found. Observation is made of the errors, which are further classified into 9 types, each tagged differently. The total number of each kind of error is counted by ConcApp.

### 3. Analysis of the Results

Table 1 is the result of classification of these errors:

As can be seen from the table, the tense errors of Chinese students are mainly in the two most-commonly used tenses, the simple present tense and the simple past tense, including the confusion of the two tenses and other errors, accounting for 84.36% of the total number. This is closely related with the type of compositions in the CET-4 and the common way Chinese students write their compositions. Students are required to write an argumentative essay of three paragraphs in the CET-4 and the content of their compositions are mostly about their campus life and the contemporary social problems, such as “Global Shortage of Fresh Water”, “Getting to Know the World Outside the Campus” and “Harmfulness of Fake Commodities”, etc. The simple present tense is used in this type of composition, and sometimes the simple past tense is used when the students are giving some past examples to illustrate their points of view. Giving examples is the most commonly used methods for the Chinese students to compose their compositions. Tense errors arise when the Chinese students are not used to changing tenses according to time in one composition and when they don't grasp the usages of different tenses very well.

#### 3.1 Misuse of the simple past tense for the simple present tense (IVp6)

- (1) tening materials. If we kept [*Ivp6*, -s] on, we will make a great
- (2) "Practice Makes Perfect" was [*Ivp6*, -s] a truth that have [vp3, s-
- (3) it. For example, we learned [*Ivp6*, -s] English. As a learner, we
- (4) ut, [sn9, s-] when you learnt [*Ivp6*, -s] a lot of words, you'll fi
- (5) 3218 >Many people often said [*Ivp6*, -s] "Practice Makes Perfect".
- (6) [1-], usually, we remembered [*Ivp6*, -s] a word and left [vp6, -s]
- (7) at anytime! [sn2, s] We used [*Ivp6*, -s] Chinese in our daily life

This type of error accounts for 35.38% of the total number, which is a very high percentage. There are mainly two sub-types for this kind of error. One is the misuse of the simple past tense for the simple present tense in the subordinate clause of the compound sentences, such as (1) and (4). As we all know, the simple present tense is used to refer to the future in the subordinate clause of the very kind of compound sentence whose main clause and subordinate clause both refer to the future. The other type of error is that when the simple present tense is required to refer to some universal realities, Chinese students use the simple past tense. For example, it is a universal truth that “practice makes perfect” in (2), so the simple present tense instead of the simple past tense should be used; the example given in (3) is not a concrete action happened in the past but refers to a universal reality, so the simple present tense should be used; in (5), (6), (7) there are time adverbials “often”, “usually”, and “in our daily life” that should be used in the simple present tense. As for the causes of the first kind of errors, the author is in the opinion that Chinese students have not mastered the type of compound sentence mentioned above and they may confuse this kind of sentence with the subjunctive sentence that makes use of the simple past tense to refer to the present things in the subordinate clause, such as “If we were on the moon now, how great it would be!”. (1) and (4) are maybe the results of this kind of confusion. There may be another less possible reason: the two verbs that are used in the main clause and the subordinate clause respectively indicate two actions that happen one after the other. Students may use the simple past tense to refer to the action happened earlier, believing that the simple past tense should be used to refer to the action happened before the one in the main clause. The second type of error is mainly the result of students' carelessness and maybe the result of the fact that Chinese students are not used to changing tenses in their compositions.

One word is worth special mention here, namely, “could”. Its misuse amounts to 22.

- (8) lish in daily life, we could [*Ivp6*, s-] speak English very well.
- (9) o pratice [fm1, -] more could [*Ivp6*, s-] make perfect, we study ha
- (10) something, so that we could [*Ivp6*, s-] master [cc3, -5] the spiri
- (11) [fm2, -], I hope that I could [*Ivp6*, s-] know more about encomical
- (12) [pp2, -2] one hand, you could [*Ivp6*, s-] get this information from

How can we account for this error? We can find the answer from the usages of this word. “Could” has mainly two kinds of usage, one being declarative and the other being subjunctive. When it is used in the declarative sense, it is the past form of “can” and means the past capability, possibility, permission and guesses, etc. When it is used in the subjunctive sense, it makes a kind of hypothesis contrary to the present and past facts or indicates the speaker's tone,

such as permission, request, polite suggestion and mild order, etc. For example, “Could you help me with my job?”, “Could you please be louder?”. We can see no sense of time is included in this kind of use. Since this word is often used in the subjunctive sense and has a high frequency, it naturally occurs to the students when they want to express the idea “neng(能)”. In Chinese, “neng(能)” includes all the meanings of “could” and “can”. Owing to intra-lingual interference, Chinese students commit this kind of error.

### 3.2 Misuse of the simple present tense for the simple past tense (2Vp6)

- (13) everyday. Soon I really can [2vp6,-s] write a composition in a  
 (14) o [wd3,s,-] read it. And I do [2vp6,-s] as he said. It turns [vp6]  
 (15) and he eventually succeed [2vp6,-s] by many experiments. [sn8]  
 (16) fter a year, the artist give [2vp6,-s] him a picture of horse [n]  
 (17) time [wd7,1-], but I don't [2vp6,-s] lose my heart. I spend a  
 (18) fm1,-] witch [wd3,2-2] can't [2vp6,-s] be cured in [wd4,-2] old  
 (19) In 1960 life expectancy is [2vp6,s-] nearly 40 years old while  
 (20) e in 1990 life expectancy is [2vp6,s-] 60 years old. It extends  
 (21) e cloth. The officials can't [2vp6,2-2] see anything. They were  
 (22) all. But he pretended he can [2vp6,4-5] see the cloth as others.

This kind of error concentrates on three types of sentences, among which errors in giving examples are the highest. In their compositions, Chinese students always like to cite some examples happened in their past daily life to illustrate their views, such as (13), (14), (15) and (17). The reason why they misuse the simple present tense to describe these past things may be their carelessness. Another reason may be that they are used to sticking to one tense in the whole passage and don't realize that they should change tenses. The second type of error still has something to do with giving examples. However, this kind of example are not the things happened to the students' past life, but some fictional stories known to everybody, such as “The New Clothes of the King” and “A Painter and a Peasant”. When these stories are told, the simple past tense is preferred although they did not actually happen in the past and there is no sense of time conveyed in them. Students' ignorance and negligence of this point results in their errors, such as (16), (21) and (22). The third type of error occurs when students are required to write a composition based on a chart, table or graph. There are some statistics in the past in these compositions to show certain tendencies of change. Owing to their carelessness or concentration of their attention on the tendencies of change, students make use of the simple present tense to describe the past things, such as (18), (19) and (20).

There is one special error in the use of subjunctive mood:

- (23) ange it. I wish Miss Lin can [2vp6,s-] point [vp1,-2] my mistake

It is obviously due to the fact that the student has not mastered the use of this kind of subjunctive sentence.

### 3.3 Other errors in the use of the simple present tense (3Vp6)

- (24) ctice it only after we grasp [3vp6,-]the spirit of the idiom. Th  
 (25) developing countries develop [3vp6,-3] quickly since 1960, the s  
 (26) in developing countries make [3vp6,-4] a new step tomorrow. <  
 (27) in their next generation are [3vp6,-s-] more strong [aj3,1-], so  
 (28) nd these water resources are [3vp6,s-] never used up, so we can  
 (29) p7,7-]. A great change takes [3vp6,3-2] place everywhere. So t  
 (30) -1] mortality [fm1,-] drops [3vp6,s-] in the future. <SCH 25  
 (30) more and more people realize [3vp6,s-] the global shortage of fr

This type of error is mainly the misuse of the simple present tense for the present perfect tense and the simple future tense. The present perfect tense has two main usages: the continuity of a past action to the present and the effect of the past action on the present, both having relation with both the present time and the past time. The Chinese students, when writing their compositions, only pay attention to the present situation while ignoring the past action that causes it. Thus, the simple present tense is mistakenly used for the present perfect tense, such as (25), (29) and (30). Another reason is that students do not master or pay attention to the time adverbials used in these sentences, such as “since 1960” in (25). This is true of the misuse of the simple present tense for the simple future tense. They

do not notice the adverbials indicating the future time, such as: “tomorrow” in (26) and “in the future” in (30). But in my opinion, the most important reason is that the students do not notice that they are talking about the things in the future, (28) being one example of this kind.

### 3.4 Other errors in the use of the simple past tense (4Vp6)

- (31) h water that we already used [4vp6,s-]. <ST 3> <SEX ?> <Y ?>  
 (32) e years, no big war happened [4vp6,s-] in [wd4,1-1] world, and a  
 (33) students. For me I decided [4vp6,s-] to study my lesson [np6,s  
 (34) er? [sn8,s-] He said he gave [4vp6,3-7] the shopkeeper the trous  
 (35) -2] have lunch. While we had [4vp6,2-6] a good lunch, we sang hi  
 (36) time. She said she just went [4vp6, 4-8] to the eijing Road and

As mentioned above, the present perfect tense involves both the present time and the past time. If the students only pay attention to the past action and ignore the present situation, the misuse of the simple past tense for the present perfect tense results, such as (31), (32) and (33). The misuse of the simple past tense for the past perfect tense is also the result of students' being ignorant of the time relations. The past perfect tense expresses the concept of “the past of the past”. In the sentences that make use of this tense, there is always a verb in the past form or an adverbial indicating past time. The action, if it happens before a past action or a past time, should be expressed by the past perfect tense. If the students do not pay attention to the relationship between the two past actions, both actions will be expressed by the simple past tense, such as (34) and (36).

One special error in this type is the misuse of the simple present tense for the past progressive tense, that is, (35).

### 3.5 The misuse of the simple future tense (5Vp6)

- (37) -.A successful man will know[5vp6,1-] the meaning of practice m  
 (38) do it perfectly. When we'll [5vp6,s-] do a thing, we must do mu  
 (39) r surrounding. After we will [5vp6,s-] leave the campus in the f  
 (40) imals' mouths [fm2,1-] will [5vp6,3-3] "eat" the balls. So one

This is the least error, only accounting for 1.2%. This is the natural result of the limitations of the type of the compositions in the CET-4 and the rare use of the tense itself. In the four erroneous sentences, errors in (38) and (39) are still the type of sentence mentioned above, that is, the compound sentence with both the main clause and the subordinate clause making use of the simple present tense to refer to the future action. The students' error lies in that they use the simple future tense in the subordinate sentence. The error in (37) is a result of the student's ignorance of the use of “will” which can be used both as a modal verb and an auxiliary. It is difficult for us to see where the error lies in (40) without context. Through looking at the several sentences around it, we get to know that the student is talking about a kind of game played in the past, which should obviously be expressed by the simple past tense.

### 3.6 The misuse of the present perfect tense (6Vp6)

- (41) socity [fm1,-], we must have [6vp6,s-] known something about it.  
 (42) ple, we will find we've made [6vp6,s-] such a progress if we do  
 (43) thing, if you have practiced [6vp6,s-] many times and you will b  
 (44) -] has [vp3,s-] been changed [6vp6,s-] since [wd3,s-] 1960 to 19  
 (45) ountries has raised [vp7,s-] [6vp6,s-] in 30 years. their [fm3,1]  
 (46) urthermore, people have used [6vp6,s-] the fresh water undergrou  
 (47) er resource [fm1,-] has been [6vp6,s-] limited, but some persons  
 (48) sons. We have asked [wd4,s-] [6vp6,2-7] some fish, chicken, eggs  
 (49) in. Yesterday, she has known [6vp6,3-] that the boy was the cadr  
 (50) t, at last, [sn1,s-] she has [6vp6,1-3] won this match. Our clas

This type of error is mainly in the misuse of the present perfect tense for the simple past tense, such as (44), (45), (48), (49) and (50), whose occurrence has the same reason with the error of the misuse of the simple past tense for the present perfect tense. There are several special erroneous examples, (42), (46) and (47) making use of the present perfect tense for the simple present tense and (41) being the erroneous use of the modal verb's perfect tense. The

student wants to express the idea of “before stepping into society, one must get to know the society”, but he uses “must have known”. It is obviously the result of the student’s being ignorance of the use of “must have done”, which is a means of expressing a speculation about a past action. In (43), the correct tense in the subordinate clause should be the future perfect tense since the simple future tense is used in the main clause. This kind of compound sentence is seldom used.

### 3.7 The misuse of the past future tense (8Vp6)

- (51) o so. [sn2,s-] We wouldn't [7vp6,s-] learn English well. For  
 (52) he campus, [sn7,s-] I would [7vp6,s-] find that it is easy to j  
 (53) of working when we would [7vp6,s-] graduate from the school.  
 (54) ion for our future. I would [7vp6,s-] try my best to get to kno  
 (55) in the future, we would [7vp6,4-] have no fresh water to us

Although this type of error only accounts for 4.1%, it has peculiar features. All the errors occur in the use of “would” in the simple present tense sentence. In another word, the simple future tense is used to replace the past future tense. This type of error has the same reason as the misuse of “could” in the simple present tense sentence. Like “could”, “would” also has two kinds of usages, declarative and subjunctive. When it is used in the declarative sense, it is the past form of “will”, meaning possibility of doing something from the viewpoint of a past time or a kind of habitual action in the past. When it is used in the subjunctive sense, it means a kind of subjunctive hypothesis contrary to the present and future facts by the speaker or a kind of subjunctive wish. It is easy for us to find that the erroneous sentences are all used to express objective future actions or a person’s future intention, so they are all declarative sentences. The simple future tense should be used instead of the past future tense in them. This type of error is still a result of intra-lingual interference. When Chinese students do not master the usages of the word “would”, they will commit errors. Also the use of the subjunctive sense of this word has a high frequency, especially in oral English, such as the sentence pattern “would you like to...”. The word “would” naturally occurs to the students when they are making sentences.

One special error in this type is (53), which is still in the compound sentence with both the subordinate clause and the main clause using the present tense to refer to the future actions. The error is in the subordinate clause, the past future tense being mistakenly used for the simple present tense.

### 3.8 The misuse of progressive tenses (8Vp6)

- (56) we are always practising [8vp6,s-] many times. Only [wd4,s-]  
 (57) n. So that I must be getting [8vp6,s-] to know the society neces  
 (58) nd job.[sn1,s-] It's meaning [8vp6,s-] that you can't do any [wd  
 (59) years. They are not knowing [8vp6,d] the outside world. And the  
 (60) nomical while we are using [8vp6,s-] fresh water. <ST 3> <S  
 (61) ing countries is increasing [8vp6,s-] from 40 to 60 in the thir  
 (62) tality is also decreasing [8vp6,s-] from 200 to 100 deaths pe  
 (63) s. People are easily seeing [8vp6,s-] water can be gotten [fm2,  
 (64) resh water. It's including [8vp6,s-] rain, river water, well w

There are altogether 16 errors in this type, among which 6 are the misuse of the verbs that indicate a state or an instantaneous action, such as (58), (59), (63) and (64). Here the problem lies in that the students do not master the concept of “aspect” conveyed in these verbs. The static verb itself has no internal time structure. As the action indicated by the verb does not happen in a certain time, it can not be divided into beginning, middle and end and therefore this kind of verb can not be used in the progressive tense. An instantaneous verb indicates an action that can not last in time because it happens instantaneously, so it can not be used in the progressive tense, too.

The other erroneous examples are peculiar to some students and have no regularity in them. In (56), the present progressive tense is mistakenly used to replace the simple present tense; in (57), the present progressive tense is wrongly used after the modal verb; in (61) and (62), the simple past tense should be used instead of the present progressive tense.

### 3.9 The misuse of the past perfect tense (9Vp6)

- (65) [sn8, 12-]. So I had said [9vp6,3-4] sorry to my parents. The

- (66) n built. People's living had [9vp6,s-] been improved. Science ha  
 (67) At last, the bell had rung [9vp6,5-6], [sn1,s-] the class s ov  
 (68) orning, my grandma had got [9vp6, 6-8] up and began [vp6,s-] t  
 (69) [sn9,11-8] today I had had [9vp6,3-4] a very good time. S  
 (70) floweres, I hope you'd grown [9vp6,3-4] up quickly and lowering

This type of error mainly concerns the confusion between the past perfect tense, the present perfect tense and the simple past tense. The reasons of these errors have been analyzed above.

#### 4. Discussion

From the above analysis, we can see that there exist certain regularities in the tense errors in the Chinese students' English compositions. Four major aspects are identified below:

- 1) The tense errors in the Chinese students' compositions are mainly in the simple present tense and the simple past tense, including their confused use and other respective errors, accounting for 84,36% of the total number.
- 2) The tense errors in compound sentences are mainly in the kind of compound sentences with the main clause and the subordinate clause both using the simple present tense to express future things. Students make mistakes when they choose the tense of the subordinate clause.
- 3) Such words as "would" and "could" with both declarative and subjunctive usages are often wrongly used by Chinese students. They are often used where "can" and "will" should be used. That is to say, students are confused with the two different usages of the two words.
- 4) The Chinese students are not sure of the concept of time indicated by different tenses and the meanings conveyed by them. This is especially true of the simple present tense, the simple past tense and the present perfect tense.

How can we account for these regularities? In fact, from the 1940s on, some scholars and researchers have been trying to find the causes of errors by foreign language learners through contrast analysis of the target language and the mother language. They found that the errors were caused by the interference of the mother tongue. Later, researchers made further analysis of the errors in the inter-language and found that some errors are the very result of the target language. More and more reasons for the errors committed by the learners have been found since then. Now people have gradually realized more sources of the errors of the inter-language. Brown (1994, p. 213-217) summarized four sources of the errors of the inter-language: 1) inter-lingual transfer, 2) intra-lingual transfer, 3) context of learning and 4) communication strategies. In the following part, the author attempts to account for the Chinese students' inter-language errors from China's specific environment, inter-lingual transfer and intra-lingual transfer.

First, there exist many problems in China's college English teaching. There is no corresponding grammar textbook attached to most college English textbooks. The teaching of grammar is in most cases the analysis of independent grammatical points in the textbook by the teacher. It is not systematic. Moreover, the teaching of grammar still lingers on the sentence level, not supported by ample discourse context. As for the test of grammar, the CET-4 and the English examinations in the university still test grammar on the sentence level.

The English teachers teach grammar for students to pass the examination and the students study grammar for the purpose of passing English examination, resulting in the separation between teaching of grammar and the teaching of reading and writing.

With regard to the teaching of tense, there are two obvious problems. On the one hand, the teaching of tense as a whole is not integral. Wherever a usage of tense appears in the text, the teacher teaches it separately. There is no comparison between different usages of one tense and between different tenses. The result of this kind of teaching is that students can only remember some separated usages and can not master tense through a comprehensive study. On the other hand, the emphasis of tense in the classroom teaching and the exam is not consistent with actual use of tenses. I have ever made a survey of the tenses tested in the CET-4 from 1995 to 2000 and found that there are altogether 18 examination questions about tense, all in the form of multiple choices, among which 11 test the perfect tense with the future perfect being the most in number. The simple present tense has never been tested. All this makes the Chinese students ignore the usages of commonly used tenses and use them at will. It is just in these tenses they commit most errors.

Second, the effect of inter-lingual transfer and intra-lingual transfer is great. As R. Ellis (1999, p.19) states, "In fact, the process of SLA is often characterized in popular opinion as that of overcoming the effects of L1, of slowly replacing the features of the L1 that intrude into the L2 with those of the target language and so of approximating

ever closer to native –speaker speech.” Our mother tongue has a great transfer effect on English learning. As we know, positive transfer contributes to our learning while negative transfer interferes with our learning. There is no concept of tense in Chinese language, so when Chinese students write a Chinese composition, they need not consider which tense should be chosen, let alone how to use tenses in compound sentences. They pay more attention to the expression of their ideas. When they write an English composition, their habit of writing Chinese composition naturally affects their use of English tenses. This is the very reason why only one tense is used throughout the whole composition and there are many tense errors in compound sentences. Sometimes the choice of tense in their compositions is only decided by their instincts.

The negative intra-lingual transfer appears because there are many tenses in English, each with more than one usage. It is inevitable that Chinese students are confused by them. Even they have mastered tenses very well, they may also make mistakes because they get nervous when having an examination. Once these errors are pointed out, the students recognize them rapidly, which is indicative of their carelessness.

### **5. Suggestions for the Teaching of Tense**

In the light of the present situation, I suggest the following ways of improving the teaching of tense:

Teachers of English should regard tense as an important grammatical point because this is a basis for reading and writing. Teachers should analyze for the students the exact meaning of tense and how “tense” and “aspect” are combined. As for the 16 tenses of English, the teacher should decide the emphasis of teaching according to their frequency and teach several tenses together through comparison and contrast. And the teacher should teach tense in specific contexts. For example, what kind of tense is used in what kind of context, when the tense should be changed and how two tenses coordinate in a compound sentence. Only in this way can students really master differences of tenses and use them correctly and properly when writing compositions.

So far as students of English are concerned, in addition to learning the use of different tenses systematically, they should also pay attention to tenses in the materials they are reading and get to know when tenses should be changed. They should use the tenses that they have learned to write English compositions, which can make them realize which tense or which usage of a certain tense they have not mastered. So they can come back to study it from the very beginning. Only through writing can students truly grasp the characteristics of English language and compose correct and idiomatic English sentences.

### **6. Conclusion**

G. Kennedy (2000, p. 122) thinks that “even before the age of computer, corpus-based studies made significant contributions to our understanding of the use of the English verb-form system.” This study proves the validity of this statement. We can see from the analysis above, there are specific regularities in the tense errors in Chinese students’ English compositions. These errors are caused by the specific Chinese English teaching environment and the inter-lingual and intra-lingual transfer. This has instructive inspiration for both teachers of English and students of English. Except the suggestions I give above, it still needs further research on how to quicken the mastery of tenses by Chinese student in a short period.

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Table 1. The types of error and their percentages

Type of error	Numbers	Percentage(%)
misuse of the simple past for the simple present (1Vp6)	121	35.38
misuse of the simple present for the simple past (2Vp6)	120	35.28
other misuse of the simple present (3Vp6)	24	7
other misuse of the simple past (4Vp6)	23	6.7
misuse of the simple future (5Vp6)	4	1.2
misuse of the present perfect (6Vp6)	14	4.1
misuse of the past future (7Vp6)	14	4.1
misuse of the progressive tenses	16	4.7
misuse of the past perfect (9Vp6)	9	2.6
total number	343	100