

## **Errors made in time and tense**

An investigation of errors made in time and tense in composition writings by 9<sup>th</sup> grade learners of English in Sweden.

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates verb errors in compositions written by 16-year-old learners of English in Sweden. The investigation consists of 44 essays which are randomly selected from the National Assessment Programme, National test in 2003 for year nine. The aims of the study are first, to investigate what types of errors the students make regarding time and tense and second, to compare the types of errors with the results found from 1995 in *To Err Is Human* (Köhlmyr, 2003). An analysis of the results shows that the students make the same types of errors as they made in 1995. From a pedagogical point of view, the most alarming results that were found in the study were first, the incorrect use of the progressive form and second, the incorrect use of *gonna*. As I see it, this study is highly interesting for all people who work in school, since conclusions drawn from the results indicate that there is a huge lack in students' knowledge in how to express time and tense correctly. I mean that after having read this study, one will understand that the school must start to teach grammar explicitly so that the students will be given a chance to use the language in a correct way in their communication.

**Keywords:** grammar, verb, student, the present tense, the past tense, the future tense

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>1.1 Background</b> .....	1
<b>1.2 Aim and Scope</b> .....	2
<b>1.3 Material and Method</b> .....	4
<b>1.4 Plan of Study</b> .....	5
<b>2. Results</b> .....	6
<b>2.1 Time and Tense</b> .....	6
<b>2.2 The present tense</b> .....	7
2.2.1 The simple present .....	8
2.2.2 The present progressive .....	9
2.2.3 The present passive .....	9
<b>2.3 The past tense</b> .....	10
2.3.1 The simple past .....	11
2.3.2 The present perfect .....	12
2.3.3 The past perfect .....	13
2.3.4 The past passive .....	14
<b>2.4 The future tense</b> .....	14
2.4.1 Expressions of the future tense, <i>will</i> .....	15
2.4.2 Expressions of the future tense, <i>be going to</i> .....	16
<b>3. Discussion</b> .....	17
<b>3.1 Errors made in the present tense</b> .....	17
<b>3.2 Errors made in the past tense</b> .....	19
<b>3.3 Errors made in the future tense</b> .....	21
<b>4. Pedagogical aspects</b> .....	22
<b>5. Summary and Conclusion</b> .....	24

## References

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Background**

Nowadays in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the English language is used all over the world and is spoken by nearly one out of four of the world's population. Moreover, the English language is spoken in more than seventy countries all over the world (Svartvik, 2001:9). According to Crystal (1995:106), the high position of the English language in the world has mainly two explanations. First, the British Empire with its colonies all over the world and second, the United States as the leader of the field of economics. Furthermore, English has become a global language which is used in conferences, science, film, music etc. In Sweden, the English language has an important role in a great many areas. Firstly, it is used for international purposes. Secondly, it is used in areas such as technology, science and research and these are some of the reasons for the teaching of English in Swedish schools. In the school commission of 1946, it was suggested that English should be a language available for all people and that would mean the borders towards the world would be opened (see Svartvik, 2001:9-10).

During the 1980s and 1990s, a communicative approach developed. Because of this, the part dealing with English in the Curriculum for the Compulsory School System 1994, Lpo94, is about language proficiency concerning communication (Malmberg, 2001:19). One thing which is worth highlighting is the fact that grammar is an extremely important area in communicative proficiency. There is a slight distinction between grammatical errors in speech and writing. In the former, incorrect use of grammar is usually of less importance, because in speech, one can make oneself understood by adding gestures, body language, sounds etc. In contrast to speech, grammatical errors in writing may involve significant consequences, for example, the message can be misinterpreted or the writer will not be taken seriously. The reason why correctly used grammar is important in writing is mainly that the writer does not have the opportunity to correct the error, while in speech the speaker has a chance to correct the error immediately (Hedström, 2001:76).

During the 1980s there was a negative attitude towards the teaching of grammar. One view held that grammar could be taught and learnt naturally, or in other words, implicitly i.e. the students should find out the grammatical rules themselves in contrast to when the teacher highlights and explains the grammatical areas explicitly. Other approaches claimed that grammar was of less importance in the teaching and therefore, it was given low priority in the classroom. However, during the end of the 1990s, the role as well as the view of grammar in English language teaching changed. Investigations based on extensive material show that

learners' grammar acquisition processes benefit from grammar which is taught explicitly as well as when there is a focus on grammar in the teaching (Hedge, 2000:143-151).

With these facts in mind, it is astonishing that in the syllabus for English for Compulsory school the word grammar only occurs once, namely, in the section "*Structure and nature of the subject*" where it is stated that "[the] different competences involved in all-round communicative skills have their counterparts in the structure of the subject. Amongst these is the ability to master a language's form i.e. its vocabulary, phraseology, pronunciation, spelling and grammar" (Skolverket, 2000:2).

Because of the above mentioned information regarding English grammar, I decided to investigate students' mastering of verbs in composition writing. The limitation to the use of time and tense of verbs is due to my interest for this area in English grammar. My hope is that this investigation will make the readers aware of the importance of using the right time and tense of the verb in written English as well as the importance of teaching grammar explicitly.

## **1.2 Aim and Scope**

This is a comparative study concerning verb errors in 44 compositions written by 16-year-old learners of English in Sweden. The compositions are selected from the National Assessment Programme, National test in 2003 for year nine. The aims of the study are to investigate what types of errors are made regarding time and tense and in addition, compare the errors with the results found in *To Err Is Human* (Köhlmyr, 2003). Grammar is an extensive area and this investigation is limited to verbs. Consequently, the question is whether students' knowledge in how to use the correct form of the verb in compositions has improved or deteriorated? General conclusions will not be possible to draw because of the low numbers of investigated compositions. Therefore, the aim of the study is to find tendencies regarding students' knowledge in verbs. These tendencies will be analysed and discussed from a pedagogical point of view. The results will then be compared with Köhlmyr's study which contains material from 1992 as well as from 1995.

This is a qualitative study which means that the verb errors made by the students will not be compared to how many times they wrote the correct form of the verbs. The analysis of the results will be concentrated on which types of errors the students made concerning time and tense, for instance the use of the progressive form when the verb should stay in the simple present. Thus, the focus of the study will be on students' actual use of time and tense in composition writing. The limitation to time and tense in verb errors is made from a

pedagogical perspective with support from the syllabus for English for Compulsory school where it is stated that: “[the] school in its teaching of English should aim to ensure that pupils develop their ability to use English to communicate in speech and writing” (Skolverket, 2000:1). To use the correct time and tense of the verb is of great importance in communication. Firstly, one has to use the right tense of the verb to convey the correct information and secondly, one has to use the language correctly otherwise both the writer as well as the message run the risk of not being taken seriously by the receiver (Hedström, 2001:76). Although, the use of time and tense is central in this study, both the progressive and the perfective aspect have been included. In instances like *He have learn it from me and dad.* (F14) both tense and aspect are involved and thus will be included in the investigation. As I see it, the whole verb phrase has to be used correctly; otherwise, the message and the messenger may be misinterpreted and/or will not be taken seriously. Errors made concerning grammatical aspect will be called combination errors.

Verbs can be studied from many different angles and this investigation will examine students’ use of time and tense in compositions looking at:

- expressions of present time - the simple present, the present progressive and the present passive
- expressions of past time - the simple past, the present perfect, the past perfect and the past passive
- expressions of future time – *will* and *be going to*.

In the investigation, errors concerning spelling mistakes, incorrect use or omission of apostrophes and word order are omitted as in:

- (1) I wish that I could me some kind of professional football player, but ... (M7)
- (2) My parents have told me that im going to die in a very low age. (M2)
- (3) Last week came X home from USA. (F10)

Moreover, when there is ambiguity regarding the type of error, i.e. if the word is misspelt or if the wrong form of the verb is used, the context will determine whether the error should be counted as a grammatical one or a misspelling, for example:

- (4) I can sometimes fell sorry for the other kids in the world ... (F2)

When there is an overuse of verbs in a verb phrase, that is when the phrase contains more verbs than is needed, there are two types of errors, first, if the verbs stay in an incorrect form and second, if the overuse changes the meaning of the sentence. Other types are not counted as errors. Two examples are seen below where the first is counted as correct and the second is incorrect.

(5) Another thing that's really is fascinating me is the "language of ... (M15)

(6) Now do you know a little bit about me and what I are doing. (F 4)

Finally, the omission of a verb, which is shown below, is counted as an error, for example if the student wants to express future tense, he/she must use either the word *will* or the expression *be going to*.

(7) I start working with my dad. (M9)

### 1.3 Material and Method

The study consists of 44 essays randomly selected from the National Test in 2003 for year 9. 22 essays are written by females and 22 by males. All students have been given the same task. They could choose between two topics to write about which were constructed in a way so the students were explicitly forced to use the present tense and the future tense in their writings. However, the students were not explicitly asked to use the past tense. Because of the fact that the test is under the Official Secrets Act, only a brief description of the test's design is possible.

In the syllabus for English for Compulsory school it is stated that when the students have finished year nine in school they should "*be able to ask for and provide information in writing, as well as relate and describe something*" (Skolverket, 2000:3). The National Test, which is obligatory and given in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, is one way of checking if the students have reached the goals. However, the test is not decisive for the students' grades. It is meant as a support for the teachers in their assessment of the students.

In 2003, approximately 115 000 students carried out the test. This means that the study is roughly built on 0.04 per cent of the tests. The length of the essays varies considerably. Some students have written fewer than 150 words, while others have written more than 500 words. An overview of the length of the compositions is illustrated in table 1.3. In addition, it is not

to be said that the writers who have written more words in their compositions have used the correct time and tense more often than the ones who have written few words.

Table 1.3 An overview of the length of the compositions

No. of words	101-150	151-200	201-250	251-300	301-350	351-400	401-450	451-500	501-550	Total
Total	2	4	4	5	8	5	6	6	4	44

All writers are anonymous and therefore their background, i.e. where they live, which school they are studying at, what their mother tongue is etc., have not been considered when analysing the results.

The errors are divided into three groups, namely, expressions of the present tense, expressions of the past tense and expressions of the future tense. They have then been analysed and categorised in sub-categories. Moreover, the material has been read several times to make sure that no slips have been made.

#### 1.4 Plan of Study

Chapter one consists of background information regarding English as a world language and the meaning of the English language in Sweden. The focus of the information concerns the view of grammar in Sweden seen from a pedagogical perspective. A section regarding aim and scope is presented followed by an extensive description of the material and method used.

In chapter two the results of the study are presented. The presentation is divided into four subheadings, namely, the present tense, the past tense, the future tense and a short summary. Each subheading consists of a description of the errors as well as a table in which the frequency of each type of the errors is presented.

Following the result chapter, a discussion chapter is presented where the most interesting errors are highlighted. This chapter is divided into three subsections. In the first section, errors that occurred in the present tense are discussed and analysed. In the second section, the errors which occurred in the past tense are discussed and analysed and in the third section, errors found in the future tense are discussed and analysed.

Chapter four contains the pedagogical aspects. The focus of the discussion is from a pedagogical perspective and mainly seen from a teaching point of view. Some suggestions on how to improve the students' grammar awareness are presented.



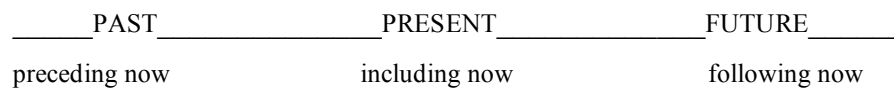
Finally, chapter number five, where a summary of the study is presented and conclusions of the investigation are given.

## 2. Results

Since this is a qualitative study, the results presented and the following discussion will chiefly be concentrated on what types of errors that occurred in the present tense, the past tense and the future tense. In addition, the errors will be presented in numbers so that the reader will get an insight in how frequently each type of error occurred. The errors will then be discussed and analysed in Chapter 3.

### 2.1 Time and tense

Time and tense includes three forms, namely, the present, the past and the future. The present is now. Actions which took place before the present moment belong to the past and actions which will take place after the present moment belong to the future. This can be illustrated as follows:



The line is of infinite length and illustrates the time. However, some grammarians claim that there are only two forms of the verb, the present and the past. Seen from a morphological perspective, verbs in English do not contain the future tense (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:175-176).

The result shows that most errors occurred in the present tense. As many as 117 errors were found in the present tense whereas, 80 and 66 errors respectively were found in the past tense and the future tense. An overview of the errors found in the three different tenses is presented in table 2.1 below. The table illustrates how many errors that were found both in numbers as well as in percentages.

Table 2.1 An overview of the errors that occurred in the present tense, the past tense and the future tense

	The present tense	The past tense	The future tense	Total
Number of errors	117	80	66	263
Per cent of errors	44 %	31 %	25%	100 %

What types of errors that were made in the present tense, the past tense and the future tense are presented and illustrated by examples in each section respectively.

## 2.2 The present tense

The frequency of errors that were made in the present tense was 117. These errors are divided and presented in three sections. First, errors made with expressions of the simple present, second, errors made with expressions of the present progressive and finally, errors made with expressions of the present passive. I have chosen to include the present progressive and the present passive in the study, since the students use the progressive form whenever they think it is appropriate and the results show that they have not enough knowledge in how and when to use this form. The present passive is included, since the errors that occurred are worth to highlight and discuss. Both the errors which occurred in the present progressive and the present passive are interesting from a pedagogical point of view and therefore, worth to highlight and discuss. Moreover, 106 errors occurred with expressions of the simple present and 6 and 5 errors respectively occurred with expressions of the present progressive and the present passive. The numbers as well as the percentage of the errors found are illustrated in table 2.2

Table 2.2 An overview of the errors that occurred with expressions of the present tense

	The simple present	The present progressive	The present passive	Total
Number of errors	106	6	5	117
Per cent of errors	90%	6%	4%	100%

In the next three sections, the errors will be divided into more specific categories due to their types and illustrated by examples.

### 2.2.1 The simple present

The simple present can be divided into three sub-categories: ‘state present’, ‘habitual present’ and ‘instantaneous present’. All three sub-categories refer to the present tense but differ in meaning. The ‘state present’ is used when one wants to refer to an action in the present without specific time reference i.e. general statements which are timeless, or in other words, everlasting truths (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:179), for example *Two times four is eight* and *Tom is beautiful*. The ‘habitual present’ is used for actions which are recurring (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:179) like: *Sara goes to Spain every summer*. Finally, the ‘instantaneous present’ is used if the verb refers to an action which starts and finishes at the same instant of the speech (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:180), for instance *Sue gives the doctor a smile*.

7 different substitutions were found for expressing the simple present; the present progressive, the simple past, the present perfect, the future tense, incorrect use of auxiliaries, the overuse of verbs and omission of verb. One example from each substitution is exemplified below:

- (8) Some organisations are helping them but it’s isn’t easy because they... (F17)
- (9) I loved the people and the country very much and I hope ... (F2)
- (10) Many have got decieses like aids and malaria. (F18)
- (11) Donald and Daisy (in Swedish their name will be Kalle and Kajsa) ... (M8)
- (12) ... maybe they didn’t try to sleep because they are afraid to get ... (M22)
- (13) But first I’ am got to study so I can get in to the gymnasium. (M1)
- (14) She is one years older to me but thiss not amader. (F10)

As many as 106 errors, or in other words 90 per cent of the errors, that occurred in the present tense were made in expressions of the simple present and are distributed as follows: the substitution of the present progressive occurred in 43 instances. The simple past was used 27 times in contrast to the present perfect which was used once. The frequency of the future tense was 8. Incorrect use of an auxiliary and the overuse of verbs were found in 15 and 5 instances respectively. Finally, omission of verb occurred 7 times. Table 2.2.1 illustrates the distribution of errors that occurred in the simple present.

Table 2.2.1 An overview of the incorrect forms used for the simple present

	The present progressive	The simple past	The present perfect	The future tense	Incorrect use of auxiliaries	The overuse of verbs	Omission of verb	Total
Number of errors	43	27	1	8	15	5	7	106
Per cent of errors	40%	26%	1%	7%	14%	5%	7%	100%

The result shows that the simple present was the most difficult tense to use in a correct way. As many as 7 types of substitutions were found.

### 2.2.2 The present progressive

The present progressive or in other words, ‘the durative’ or ‘continuous aspect’ signifies that an event is in progress at a special moment. Moreover, there are three different significances of the use of the progressive, namely, first, the event has duration, second, the event has limited duration and finally, the event is still in progress (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:197-198).

6 errors were found with expressions of the present progressive. All 6 errors were of the same type, namely, the present progressive was replaced by the simple present as in:

(15) I try to lose some weight. (F11)

### 2.2.3 The present passive

There are two auxiliaries used in constructions with the present passive, namely, *be* and *get* where the former is the most common one used (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:160). The present passive is constructed by a form of *be* or *get* + *past participle* as in: *The cat is chased by the dog.*

3 different substitutions were found for expressing the present passive; the present progressive, the simple past and the incorrect use of the concept *be* + *past participle*. One example of each type is presented below:

(16) When I watch tv, or read a book, I’m getting suked in to other ... (F12)

(17) And sometimes X come out and then one how called Y now live in ... (F4)

(18) ... this new moped is build for around one hundred kilometers per ... (M3)

The number of errors that occurred with expressions of the present passive was 5 and is distributed as follows: the present passive was substituted by the present progressive once and the simple past and the concept *be + past participle* twice each. In table 2.2.3, an overview of the errors is presented both in numbers as well as in percentages.

Table 2.2.3 An overview of the incorrect forms used for the present passive

	The present progressive	The simple past	The concept <i>be + past participle</i>	Total
Number of errors	1	2	2	5
Per cent of errors	20%	40%	40%	100%

As can be seen from the result, few errors occurred with expressions of the present passive. A further discussion and analysis follows in Chapter 3.

### 2.3 The past tense

The errors that were found in the past tense are divided and presented in four sections; first, errors which belong to the simple past, second, errors made in the present perfect, third, errors found in the use of the past perfect and finally, errors which occurred with expressions of the past passive. The past passive is included in the investigation, since this form is really important and useful in writing. An overview of the result is shown in table 2.3 below. A total number of 80 errors occurred with expressions of the past tense. 43 errors were found with expressions of the simple past, whereas 29 and 7 errors were found with expressions of the present perfect and the past perfect respectively. Incorrect use of the past passive occurred once.

Table 2.3 An overview of the errors that occurred with expressions of the past tense

	The simple past	The present perfect	The past perfect	The past passive	Total
Number of errors	43	29	7	1	80
Per cent of errors	54%	36%	9%	1%	100%

In the next three sections the errors will be categorised and illustrated by examples.

### 2.3.1 The simple past

The simple past indicates that something happened at a specific moment in the past. In conformity with the simple present, the simple past contains three different meanings; the ‘event past’, the ‘state past’ and the ‘habitual past’. Referring to a single and specific action in the past is the ‘event state’. When the verb’s meaning is a statement, the ‘state past’ is used and finally, the ‘habitual past’ concerns those verbs which refer to a repetition of an action (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:186).

As many as 8 different substitutions were found for expressing the simple past; the simple present, the present progressive, the past progressive, the past passive, the future tense, auxiliaries, -ing form of the verb and omission of verb. Examples of each type are illustrated below.

- (19) ... and I was born in Sweden when the war I Lebanon begin. (M5)
- (20) We are sleeping in hotels. (M9)
- (21) Then me and my mother was going on a meeting with the principal ... (F15)
- (22) But they was stoped to compit because they was tired on it. (M13)
- (23) When I gonna shopping I meet Johan he was my best friend. (M9)
- (24) And we don’t had clean water and Elektric and medecin. (F5)
- (25) Comparing to that, our stressproblem isn’t THAT big of a deal, ... (M14)
- (26) ...was wedauth hear, she to me at I can’t live without you. (F10)

The result shows that 43 errors occurred with expressions of the simple past. Instead of using the simple past, the simple present was used in 24 cases. The present progressive and the past progressive were used once and 3 times respectively. The past passive and the future tense occurred once each. Incorrect uses of the auxiliaries were found 10 times and finally, the use of the *-ing* form of the verb and omission of verb occurred once and twice respectively. These figures are illustrated in table 2.3.1.

Table 2.3.1 An overview of the incorrect forms used for the simple past

	The simple present	The present progressive	The past progressive	The past passive	The future tense	Incorrect use of the auxiliaries	-ing form of the verb	Omission of verb	Total
Number of errors	24	1	3	1	1	10	1	2	43
Per cent of errors	56%	2%	7%	2%	2%	24%	2%	5%	100%

Regarding the past tense, more than 50 per cent of the errors occurred with expressions of the simple past.

### 2.3.2 The present perfect

There is a slight difference between the use of the simple past and the present perfect. They both indicate that the action took place before the present moment, but the use of the former means that the action is over it has come to an end, while the latter is used for actions which have continued up to or even continue after the present moment. Quirk *et al.* explain the use of the present perfect as: “... *the present perfective signifies past time ‘with current relevance’*” (1985:190).

5 different substitutions were found for expressing the present perfect; the simple present, the simple past, the past perfect, the future tense and combination errors with the auxiliary *have*. Examples of the substitutions are shown below:

- (27) I learn feel a lot of peoples and I have a lot of friends in the team. (M9)
- (28) But when I met him everything is perfect. (F5)
- (29) We had always have animals so long a have lived anyway. (M13)
- (30) I think I’ll never had cryed so much as I did that night. (F1)
- (31) And when she have ride we go home to X again and take it easy ... (F4)

The total number of errors that occurred with expressions of the present perfect was 29 and is distributed in the following way: instead of using the present perfect, the simple present and

the simple past were used twice and 3 times respectively. The past perfect occurred twice. The future tense was found once and the frequency of combination errors with the auxiliary *have* was 21. An overview of the numbers is shown in table 2.3.2.

Table 2.3.2 An overview of the incorrect forms used for the present perfect

	The simple present	The simple past	The past perfect	The future tense	Combination errors with the auxiliary <i>have</i>	Total
Number of errors	2	3	2	1	21	29
Per cent of errors	7%	10%	7%	3%	73%	100%

Combination errors with the auxiliary *have* were the most frequent ones. More than 70 per cent of the errors were so called combination errors.

### 2.3.3 The past perfect

The past perfect is used when the action took place and ended in the past. The past perfect can be seen as ‘past-in-the-past’ (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:195-196).

The result of the incorrect forms used with expressions of the past perfect is illustrated in table 2.3.3. Only 7 errors were found. The use of the present perfect instead of the past perfect was the most common error and occurred 3 times. Incorrect use of the construction *had* + *past participle* as well as combination errors with *had* occurred twice each. Some of the errors were:

(32) I have had I fight with my teacher or I’v had a lots of fights ... (F15)

(33) And when Bush was runned out of cash, Saddam would say: I ... (F19)

(34) After we had shopping we play football. (M9)



Table 2.3.3 An overview of the incorrect forms used for the past perfect

	The present perfect	Incorrect use of the construction <i>had + past participle</i>	Combination errors with <i>had</i>	Total
Number of errors	3	2	2	7
Per cent of errors	42%	29%	29%	100%

The result shows that only 7 errors were made with expressions of the past perfect. This may depend on the fact that the past perfect was hardly used in the investigated material. However, a further discussion about this phenomenon will be found in Chapter 3.

### 2.3.4 The past passive

There are two auxiliaries used in constructions with the past passive, namely, *be* and *get* where the former is the most common one used (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:160). The past passive is constructed by *was/were* or *got + past participle* as in: *The cat was chased by the dog.*

There is only one case where the past passive is used incorrectly. The student has used the wrong form of the verb and looked like this:

(35) But when she been gone everybody been shocked. (F13)

The fact that the past passive only occurred incorrectly once may depend on the test topics which the students could choose to write about.

### 2.4 The future tense

One way and the most frequent one to express the future tense is to use modal auxiliary constructions with either *will* or *shall*. The former is used with a first, second and third person subject whereas the latter is only used when the subject is a first person (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:213).

Another way of expressing the future tense is the use of the concept *be going to*. This form is mainly used in informal language and means ‘future fulfilment of the present’. The concept *be going to* has two meanings: first, “... *future fulfilment of present intention* ...” (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:214) where the subject is a human and the verb is agentive. Second, “... *future result*

of present cause ...” (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:214) where the subject can be both a human as well as a non-human.

66 errors were found with expressions of the future tense. 49 errors occurred in *will*-constructions while 17 errors occurred with the concept *be going to*. Table 2.4 illustrates the distribution of the errors.

Table 2.4 An overview of the errors that occurred with expressions of the future tense

	Expressions of <i>will</i>	Expressions of <i>be going to</i>	Total
Number of errors	49	17	66
Per cent of errors	74%	26%	100%

The errors are categorised and exemplified in the following two sections. First, a section where errors concerning *will* are presented and second, errors that occurred with expressions of the concept *be going to*.

### 2.4.1 Expressions of the future tense, *will*

5 different substitutions were found for expressing the future tense, *will*; the present tense, the past tense, the use of the concept *be going to*, omission of a main verb and omission of *will*.

Below, each type is exemplified:

- (36) I can tell you about one time when I were proud over my mum ... (F15)
- (37) In the future I hope that I've got enough education so I get a ... (F19)
- (38) My thoughts about the future are that Iran is going to be a free ... (F3)
- (39) I will them all. (M8)
- (40) I hope that I not lose my friends or some of them got killed ... (M10)

The total number of errors that occurred was 49. The most common error that occurred was the use of the present tense instead of the future tense *will*. No fewer than 23 cases were found. In 10 cases, the past tense was used instead of the future tense, *will*. The concept *be going to* occurred in 9 cases. Omission of a main verb only occurred once while omission of the word *will* was found 6 times. An overview of the result is shown in table 2.4.1.

Table 2.4.1 An overview of the incorrect forms used for the future tense, *will*.

	The use of the present tense	The use of the past tense	The expression <i>be going to</i>	Omission of a main verb	Omission of the word <i>will</i>	Total
Number of errors	23	10	9	1	6	49
Per cent of errors	47%	21%	18%	2%	12%	100%

The result indicates that the students have difficulties in distinguishing between when to use the present tense and the future tense.

#### 2.4.2 Expressions of the future tense, *be going to*

6 different substitutions were found for expressing the future tense, *be going to*; the present tense, the past tense, the use of *will*, omission of a form of *be*, incorrect use of the construction *be going to* and the use of ‘gonna’ in an inaccurate way. Examples of the six different categories of errors are given below.

- (41) I start working with my dad. (M9)
- (42) I schuld write in the newspaper to day about the world. (F11)
- (43) Well, now I have erased my brain, so I will stop writing now. (F12)
- (44) I going to change school to high school. (F17)
- (45) ...me and someone else in my family is gone to travel to Lebanon. (M5)
- (46) ... and we gonna had a baby together with names Wilma. (F6)

A total of 17 errors were found and they are distributed as follows: the future tense, *be going to* was substituted by the present tense and the past tense once each. The use of *will* and the omission of a form of *be* occurred twice each. The inaccurate use of the concept *be going to* occurred 3 times and finally, incorrect use of ‘gonna’ occurred as many as 8 times. Table 2.4.2 illustrates the result of the investigation regarding the concept *be going to*. The result is presented both in numbers and in percentages.

Table 2.4.2 An overview of the incorrect forms used for the future tense, *be going to*.

	The present tense	The past tense	The use of <i>will</i>	The omission of <i>be</i>	Incorrect use of <i>be going to</i>	The wrong use of 'gonna'	Total
Number of errors	1	1	2	2	3	8	17
Per cent of errors	6%	6%	12%	12%	17%	47%	100%

From a pedagogical perspective, the most interesting type of error that occurred is the incorrect use of 'gonna'. A discussion concerning this phenomenon will take place in Chapter 3.

### 3. Discussion

Tendencies which can be drawn from the investigated material show that the most difficult tense to use in a correct way was the present tense followed by the past tense and finally, the future tense. These results are in accordance with Köhlmyr's study where the same results were found. The focus of the following discussion will not be on the total number of errors made; instead the discussion will focus on the most important errors made seen from a pedagogical point of view. However, the results will be compared with Köhlmyr's results from compositions written in 1995 since these are the most interesting ones for this study. Moreover, the errors will be analysed and discussed from a pedagogical point of view and proposals will be given regarding the teaching of grammar.

#### 3.1 Errors made in the present tense

Most of the errors found, or in other words, almost half of the errors (44%) occurred with expressions of the present tense. The errors belong to three sub-categories, namely, the simple present where as many as 90 per cent of the errors occurred in contrast to the progressive present and the present passive where the numbers were 6 and 5 per cent respectively. In addition, the test topics were constructed in a way which implicitly forced the students to use the present tense more than the other two. This may be an explanation of why most errors occurred in the present tense.

The students had difficulties in expressing the simple present. As many as 90 per cent of the errors made in the present tense involved the simple present and 7 different substitutions for the simple present were found. The most common substitution was the use of the present progressive as in: “*Some organisations are helping them but it’s isn’t easy because they ...*” (F17). The result indicates that there is an enormous uncertainty among the students whether the simple present or the present progressive should be used. This result is also found in Köhlmyr’s study where she claims that “[the] use of the progressive for the simple present accounts for an overwhelming majority of these cases (94% n=138)” (p. 280). Moreover, I totally agree with Köhlmyr when she says that one can expect errors like these to occur since there is no corresponding form in Swedish (p. 280).

Another common substitution which was also found in Köhlmyr’s study was the use of the simple past instead of the simple present as in: “*Almost everyone how live in X said that it is boring in X ...*” (F4). Many of these errors were made in cases where irregular verbs were used and means that the result can be interpreted in two ways, either the students do not have enough knowledge about how these verbs are inflected, or the students are so concentrated on what they are writing that they forget the form of the verb (Köhlmyr, 2003:279). As I see it, these types of errors are totally unnecessary and could have been avoided if the teacher had taught grammar explicitly and if the students would have more time to practise grammar. It is this type of error which makes the writer and the text run the risk of not being taken seriously.

A third type of error I would like to highlight is the omission of verb as in: “*She is one years older to me but this not amader.*” (F10). Since verbs have a central role in both English and Swedish the students should not have made errors like this. The students are taught early in their school years that a sentence consists of a subject and a verb. The only reasonable reason for making such error is, as I see it, the student has made a slip.

It is not surprising that the 6 errors made in expressions of the present progressive were of the same type of substitution since Swedish students have difficulties in mastering when to use the present progressive. In all cases, the present progressive was replaced by the simple present as in: “*I try to lose some weight.*” (F11). As is discussed above, the mix-up between the simple present and the present progressive is predicted to occur in writings. As I see it, the only way of helping the students to master the use of the present progressive is through teaching this grammatical area explicitly by, for example highlight the different meanings between the use of the simple present and the progressive present in examples like: *I study English* and *I am studying English*.

In the material, few instances of the present passive were found and as a consequence of this, few errors were made. However, the errors found are still worth to highlight. First, even in this form, the substitution by the present progressive occurred as in: “*When I watch tv, or read a book, I’m getting suked in to other...*” (F12). Tendencies indicate that the progressive form is overwhelmingly overused in all tenses. Second, in instances like: “*And sometimes X come out and then one how called Y now live in...*” (F4), the student may not know that there is such a form as the present passive. He/she is satisfied with the choice of using the simple past which is a form he/she masters. Finally, one of the most interesting cases is one where two students have tried to use the present passive, but instead of using the past participle form of the main verbs they have used the present form as in: “*...this new moped is build for around one hundred kilometers per...*” (M3). In addition, the main verbs were irregular and as is discussed above one explanation can be that the students do not master the inflections of these verbs. Another view is that some students know about this form but they do not know how to construct the present passive: a form of *be + past participle*.

### **3.2 Errors made in the past tense**

The errors made in the past tense are categorised into four groups, namely, the simple past, the present perfect, the past perfect and the past passive. A total number of 80 errors were found and more than 50 per cent occurred with the simple past followed by the present perfect, the past perfect and finally, the past passive. One thing to bear in mind is the fact that the test topics were constructed in a way which implicitly indicated that the past tense did not have to be used.

As many as 8 different substitutions were found for expressing the simple past. In more than 50 per cent of the cases the simple present was used instead of the simple past. On the one hand, the occurrence of errors like: “*...and I was born in Sweden when the war I Lebanon begin.*” (M5) is surprising, since the equivalent in Swedish is the same. Both English and Swedish use the simple past in cases like this, but on the other hand, in instances like: “*I’m born to be a football-player.*” (M19) one can understand that Swedish students make this type of error, since in Swedish the present tense is used as in: ‘*Jag är född till fotbollsspelare*’. However, one explanation to why the simple past is substituted by the simple present can be, as discussed before, the fact that the students do not master the inflections of irregular verbs. Another explanation is that the students use the Swedish equivalent, so called transfer error. Moreover, the same type of errors and discussion occurred in Köhlmyr’s study (p. 272).

Even in expressions of the simple past, the progressive form was used as a substitution as in: “*Then me and my mother was going on a meeting with the principal...*” (F15) and as said before, the students do not master how or when to use the progressive form. They use it whenever they want. The same phenomenon was found in Köhlmyr’s material from 1995 (p. 279-280).

As is mentioned above, it is surprising that omission of verb like: “... *was wedauth hear, she to me at I can’t live wyhout you.*” (F10) occurs when one of the first grammatical areas a student is taught is the fact that a sentence consists of a subject and a verb. As I see it, there is no acceptable explanation for errors like this to occur in writings by 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. Errors like this are likely to be slips but affect the communication between the writer and the receiver in a negative way.

Since I have chosen to include both tense as well as the whole verb phrase in this investigation, the total number of errors made in expressions of the present perfect was 29. As much as 73 per cent of the errors were of the type like: “*And when she have ride we go home to X again and take it easy...*” (F4) and are so called combination errors with the auxiliary *have*. It is interesting that the students managed to use the right tense, but they did not know how to construct the perfect form. However, if the whole verb phrase had been excluded from the investigation, the students would have had a good knowledge in how and when to use this tense even if the present perfect was not frequently used. The same result is found by Köhlmyr (p. 70).

The past perfect was rarely used in the material and only 7 errors were made in this tense. Errors like: “*I have had I fight with my teacher or I’ve had a lots of fights...*” (F15) and “*And when Bush was runned out of cash, Saddam would say: I...*” (F19) are slips, since the equivalent in Swedish is the same, namely, ‘*jag hade haft ...*’ and ‘*när Bush hade slut på pengar ...*’. Moreover, combination errors with the auxiliary *had* as in: “*After we had shopping we play football.*” (M9) indicate that the students do not have enough knowledge in how to construct the past perfect. They use the right tense, but fail in using the whole verb phrase correctly.

The past passive was hardly used at all and consequently, only one error occurred. The type of error was incorrect form of the verb as in: “*But when she been gone everybody been shocked.*” (F13). As I see it, in this case the student does not have knowledge in how to express this kind of message and therefore uses a verb phrase which he/she thinks is right.

### 3.3 Errors made in the future tense

The errors made in the future tense were very interesting from a pedagogical perspective. In nearly half of the cases of expressions of *will*, the future tense was substituted by the present tense as in: “*I can tell you about one time when I were proud over my mum...*” (F15). The same type of error occurred in Köhlmyr’s study and therefore tendencies indicate that still in 2003 the students have a huge lack in their knowledge in the use of the future tense. However, this phenomenon is not surprising, since the simple present is commonly used in Swedish in expressions of the future tense whereas in English the simple present is used in expressions which concern an event which will take place at a special moment or time in the future. In contrast to this, in Swedish the simple present can be used in expressions of the future tense whether the event will take place at a special moment or time in the future or not (Köhlmyr, 2003:271-272).

As well as in the present tense and the past tense, the students made so called omission errors. The omissions were of two types, either a main verb was omitted or the word *will* as in: “*I will them all.*” (M8) and “*I hope that I not lose my friends or some of them got killed...*” (M10) respectively. The former is a slip. If the student had read through the text carefully, the slip would probably have been avoided, while the latter indicates that the students do not have enough knowledge in how to express the future tense. Instead, they try to use a ‘Swedish form’ of expressing the future.

When it comes to expressing the future tense by means of the construction *be going to*, most of the errors were of the type of using *gonna* incorrectly as in: “... and we gonna had a baby together with names Wilma.” (F6). This type of error is interesting, since *gonna* is a way of substitution for *be going to*. The correct way to use *gonna* is as in: “... it’s gonna get it much better in the future.” (F6) where a form of *be + gonna* is used. A conclusion and an explanation drawn from the result is that the students have heard, for example in songs and on TV that the word *gonna* can be used to express the future tense, but they have not been taught explicitly the right way to use it. From my experience, the informal way of expressing the future tense by *gonna* is not taught in schools. However, Köhlmyr found the same type of error where *gonna* was used without a preceding form of *be*. Consequently, students make the same types of errors in 2003 as they made in 1995. As I see it, it is about time that we do something to prevent these types of errors to occur. We can not longer blink the fact, we have to realise the truth. It is obvious that the students have learnt that the future tense can be expressed by *gonna* and therefore it is most important that the teachers teach grammar explicitly, otherwise errors like this will increase and students’ knowledge in grammar will



deteriorate. Moreover, the students today, in 2008, listen to music and watch TV where the spoken language is English. This has a great influence on the students' language awareness. As a result, they make contacts with all kinds of English dialects and if the teachers do not teach grammar explicitly and explain and highlight the differences between spoken and written as well as informal and formal language the students' knowledge in grammar run the risk of deterioration. In addition, it would be highly interesting to investigate how textbooks and teaching aids handle the phenomenon *gonna*, but that is an area I leave to another person to investigate.

Omission is a recurring type of error, both in my study as well as in Köhlmyr's, and in some cases in expressions of the future tense *be going to* the students have omitted *be* as in: "*I going to change school to high school.*" (F17). As mentioned above, this indicates that the students are unsure how to express the future tense. The most likely explanation is that they do not know how to express the equivalent in English to the Swedish word 'skall'.

To sum up, the errors made are of different types. From a pedagogical point of view, some errors are acceptable and can be explained by logical reasons while others are unacceptable at this age. One thing that is alarming is the fact that still in 2003 the students make the same types of errors that they made in 1995. Something has to be done about this. Pedagogues have to change their way of teaching grammar so that the students increase their knowledge in grammar and learn to express themselves in a more correct way. In Lpo 94, the communicative approach is the central one. One way to help the students with their communicative skills is to teach grammar explicitly. In this way they will learn how to express themselves correctly both in speech and in writing.

#### **4. Pedagogical aspects**

The results I have found in my study have been both interesting as well as alarming. Errors that are of the types of slips have always occurred and will always be made in composition writings. But if the students read through their texts carefully the slips would decrease to an acceptable level. As I see it, it is mostly important that the teachers highlight this for the students and practice this moment in the classroom. One useful way of doing this is to let the students read through each others' texts and give response.

The alarming things about the result are that students have not enough knowledge in how to use the future tense and that they use *gonna* in an inaccurate way. These phenomena also

occurred in Köhlmyr's study (2003) and means that these are problems which have occurred for a long time. Something has to be done about this and, as I see it, one way of solving the problem is to start to teach grammar explicitly. According to Lpo94, the school should aim at a communicative approach in their teaching but as Hedge (2000) claims: "*There is no way that one can 'know' a language without knowing its grammatical basis.*" (p. 171). I think that the importance of teaching grammar explicitly has been forgotten. The school has mainly concentrated on trying to teach the students to communicate, but communication requires a huge knowledge of grammar. It is of great importance that the message is grammatically correct, otherwise both the messenger and the message run the risk of being misunderstood and not being taken seriously. Moreover, my point is not that the school should not work according to a communicative approach, what I propose is in accordance with Hedge's (2000) claim that "*[with] regard to learner variables, it is perhaps more a question of finding a suitable approach than seeing a focus on grammar as more or less important.*" (p. 175). I totally agree with Hedström's reasoning (2001: 76) that no one wants the time to come back when the school mainly taught grammar and the approach was that knowing a language is to know its grammar only. But there must be a balance between grammar and the other skills. As I see it, a balance between the different skills would be the most ultimate way of working in school. The students' needs must be the central point in the teaching and tendencies from my study indicate that the students need more grammar teaching.

Moreover, as is mentioned in section 1.1 the word grammar only occurs once in the syllabus for English for Compulsory school and the occurrence comes last in a list concerning the mastering of language form. This is very interesting, since the teachers are supposed to work according to the syllabus in their teaching and when the word grammar only is used once, last in a list, one can ask what kinds of signals this will send teachers. I would guess that teachers do not focus on grammar in their teaching or see the explicit teaching of grammar as the important thing that it really is. However, this is an interesting thought which calls for more investigation.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

The aims of the study were first, to investigate what types of errors the students make regarding time and tense and second, to compare the types of errors with the results found in *To Err Is Human* (Köhlmyr, 2003). The errors have been divided into three groups, namely, expressions of the present time, expressions of the past time and expressions of the future time. Furthermore, the errors have then been analysed and categorised into sub-categories.

The material consisted of 44 essays which were randomly selected from the free written composition part of the National Test in 2003 for year 9. All writers were anonymous and therefore their background, i.e. where they live, which school they are studying at, what their mother tongue is etc., have not been considered when analysing the results.

Verbs can be studied from many different angles and this investigation was delimited to examine students' use of time and tense in compositions looking at:

- expressions of present time - the simple present, the present progressive and the present passive
- expressions of past time - the simple past, the present perfect, the past perfect and the past passive
- expressions of future time – *will* and *be going to*.

Although, the use of time and tense was central in this study, both the progressive and the perfective aspect have been included. In instances like *He have learn it from me and dad.* (F14) both tense and aspect are involved and thus have been included in the investigation.

The results showed that most errors occurred with expressions of the present tense followed by the past tense and the future tense. This may depend on the way in which the test topics were constructed. The students were implicitly forced to use the present tense more than the other two.

Regarding the present tense, the students had difficulties in expressing the simple present. The most common substitution was the use of the present progressive instead of the simple present as in: “*Some organisations are helping them but it's isn't easy because they ...*” (F17). The result indicated that there is an enormous uncertainty among the students whether the simple present or the present progressive should be used. Another common substitution which was also found in Köhlmyr's study was the use of the simple past instead of the simple present as in: “*Almost everyone how live in X said that it is boring in X ...*” (F4). A third type

of error that occurred was the omission of verb as in: “*She is one years older to me but this not amader.*” (F10). The omission of verb occurred in expressions of all three tenses.

Regarding the past tense, the most common error that the students made was that the simple present was used instead of the simple past as in: “*...and I was born in Sweden when the war I Lebanon begin.*” (M5). Moreover, even in expressions of the simple past, the progressive form was used as a substitution as in: “*Then me and my mother was going on a meeting with the principal...*” (F15). Since both tense as well as the whole verb phrase were included in this investigation, a great many so called combination errors with the auxiliary *have* were found.

Regarding the future tense, nearly half of the cases of expressions of *will* were substituted by the present tense as in: “*I can tell you about one time when I were proud over my mum...*” (F15). When it comes to expressing the future tense by means of the construction *be going to*, most of the errors were of the type of using *gonna* incorrectly as in: “*... and we gonna had a baby together with names Wilma.*”

From a pedagogical perspective, this investigation has been very interesting. The most important conclusion that can be drawn from the results is that the students still in 2003 make the same types of errors as they made in 1995. As I see it, the teaching of grammar must change so that the students’ grammar awareness increases. One way of solving this problem, is to start to teach grammar explicitly. In the syllabus for English for Compulsory school the word grammar only occurs once and this may be a reason for way the students still in 2003 make the same types of errors as they made in 1995. With support from this investigation I believe that the syllabus has to be rewritten so that the teachers will understand the importance of teaching grammar explicitly. Grammar is the basis in a language and therefore it is of great importance in a communicative approach which is the basis in Lpo94.

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