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Acquisition of Verb-Tenses among ESL Lecturers: An MDAB Pilot Study

Dr Carolyn Soo Kum Yoke

Nor Haniza Hasan

ABSTRACT

This study examines the acquisition of Verb-Tenses by ESL lecturers using a prototype instrument called the T-Chronometer. The aim is to see to what extent the ESL lecturers are able to use the concept of tenses by means of the T-Chronometer for the purpose of teaching. This tool has been pilot tested on 21 ESL lecturers who taught the BEL011 Intensive English Course (MDAB Programme). They were given a pre and post test on verb-tenses after being exposed to the teaching method using the T-Chronometer tool. The results of the pre and post tests were compared for significant values using a T-test. The results measured were positive showing a significance in the use of the T-Chronometer for the teaching verb-tenses. It is therefore recommended that future studies be conducted for use among ESL learners.

Keywords: prototype instrument, present tense, past tense, future tense, T-Chronometer

1. Introduction

English verb tenses have been widely taught in ESL classrooms using both the direct and indirect approach. It has been said to be one of the most difficult grammatical items to be taught and most learners fail to grasp the concept of tenses even after going through a whole language programme on grammar. Instructors have tried to explain tenses by means of games, songs, tables and time line charts. Numerous studies have been conducted based on the acquisition of tenses, aspects and moods by ESL learners (Kristiane 2005; Legendre, Hagstrom, Todorova & Vainikka, 2000; Sharmini, Tee, Singaram & Kamaruzaman, 2009). Yet, it appears that learners still find English verb tenses challenging. Thus, it has been found particularly interesting to investigate verb tenses as there are many factors that could have contributed to the learners' incompetency in fully comprehending them. This study does not claim to provide a bulletproof effective solution to the acquisition of English verb tenses by ESL learners. However, it will attempt to address the matter by means of an experimental research on a prototype instrument injected into the classroom lesson.

The problem that most ESL learners face in learning English verb tenses is differentiating between the different tenses. Firstly, they do not know how many English verb tenses actually exist. This is because verb tenses are normally taught as separate entities. Secondly, they do not understand the different functions of different verb tenses. For example, they may be confused between usage of the Past perfect and Past perfect continuous tenses. Thirdly, they may also find it difficult because the formulas related to the tenses have not been clearly explained to them. ESL teachers themselves may

have problems differentiating the different tenses and therefore avoid providing explanation on the subject. The persistence of this problem carried along the years may fossilize eventually. Thus, ESL learners eventually find learning tenses difficult and boring. They 'shut down' the moment the lesson is tenses. It is therefore interesting to test the usage of the T-C among ESL instructors to find out if this negative behavior towards learning tenses is prevalent. In view of this, the present study intends to look at the teaching of verb tenses for acquisition by ESL learners through an instrument called the T-Chronometer.

The T-Chronometer is a tool designed to assist in the teaching of verb tenses. It uses the concept of a clock to measure time. Instead of the 12 numbers on a face of a clock, the T-Chronometer or T-C is divided into 3 parts. Further, each part is divided into 4 subparts. A clock usually has a long hand and short hand to tell the hour and minutes when we read the time. The T-C has only one hand and this hand is called the verb. Research has shown that people in general are visual learners, thus using the clock analogy to explain the verb tenses as a time indicator for English sentence structures is feasible when learners are able to see the T-C as a conceptual object.

There are evidence that support the claim that learners are greatly influenced by their mother tongue or first language (L1) when picking up a second language (L2). There are a number of theories on first language (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition and how L1 influence L2 acquisition such as Functionalist Theories, Universal Grammar, Communicative Theories, Cognitive Theories and Behaviorist Theories. This study

intends to use the Universal Grammar theory that L2 learners may have partial access to Universal Grammar in their acquisition. It would be interesting to see if the use of the T-Chronometer could help in acquisition or whether the process of acquisition is fossilized partially to the extent that acquisition is incomplete.

Chomsky's Universal Grammar approach states that all human beings inherit a universal set of principles and parameters that control the shape of their language (Mitchell & Myles, 2004: 54). In Chomsky's Government and Binding theory (1986), it is argued that principles are unvarying and apply to all natural languages while parameters have a limited number of open values which characterize differences between languages (parametric variation). In his Minimalist Program, Chomsky (1995, 2000, in Mitchell & Myles, 2004: 54) explained that human languages are stored in the lexicon (word store) which consists of two categories: (1) lexical categories and (2) functional categories. Parametric variation is located in the functional categories within the lexicon. They are characterized by functional features (also known as features) that vary from language to language, resulting in differences in word order, morphology and so forth. This order in the human mind would be very interesting to consider in view of the present study.

Several studies have investigated the acquisition of tenses by L2 learners. In the study by Sharmini et al. (2009), L2 learners of English from Chinese speaking background were found to be able to acquire the past-tense marker although the Chinese language

did not have this feature. Thus, the study showed that the acquisition of the past tense markers could not have been triggered by their L1. The learners would therefore have to have reset the parameters for acquisition of past tense markers using their inter language competence of tenses in the L2.

In another study by Legendre et al. (2000), an Optimality-Theoretic model was developed for the acquisition of tense and agreement in Child French. The model proposed that the observed forms of language are built on interaction between conflicting constraints. The interaction maps from inputs to outputs and inputs are the underlying representations while outputs are the surface realizations. The study investigated previously overlooked properties of the acquisition of tense and agreement. Previous analyses did not explain changing frequencies of tense and agreement explicitly but the current study proposed that the frequency predictions are a natural consequence of the re-ranking mechanism. Musumeci (1989) investigated the morphological and phonological aspects in a cross linguistic study of tense assignment by L2 learners Italian, French and Spanish background under varying conditions. The results show that L2 is a factor in input processing, L2 learners go through developmental stages, they tend to rely on lexical items to indicate tense, morphemes are more salient when they are both phonologically distinct and consistent and gestures indicating temporal reference do not assist L2 acquisition of tense assignment. With reference to the present study, it would indicate that L2 learners' acquisition of tense is not naturally acquired and they may be influenced by their L1.

Yamazaki (2005) examined the effect of L2 input on L2 output with regard to the acquisition of verbal morphology from the perspective of an association of lexical classes of verbs with past tense and progressive morphemes. Twenty one volumes of ESL textbooks were examined and the results showed that output of Japanese learners of English has not been created only based on their L2 input in the domain of acquisition of verbal morphology. Hout (2007) examined the optimal and non-optimal interpretations in the acquisition of Dutch past tense. The study tested the aspectual meanings of three Dutch past tenses: Present Perfect, Imperfect Past and Past Progressive. The results showed that children will be target-like in their production, even though they are non-optimal in their behavior when it comes to comprehension. In relations to this study, Legendre et al. (2000), Musumeci (1989), Yamazaki (2005), and Hout (2007) studies show that L2 learners acquisition of tenses are influenced by their L1 in terms of morphology and phonology. The basis of the acquisition therefore should have relevance to their environment. The T-Chronometer attests to this by means of the concept of time which is a concept that they have naturally understood through their surrounding environment. Thus, learning tenses as a part of time in the present, past and future can be better understood by the L2 learners.

2. The Study

The present study examines the acquisition of English verb tenses by ESL lecturers at Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor. The purpose is to (1) investigate whether using the T-C promotes acquisition of English verb tenses; (2) determine whether the T-Chronometer approach to learning of English tenses is applicable in language

classrooms. In order to do this, a pilot study was conducted involving 21 lecturers who attended the workshop “English Teaching and Learning Enhancement for the MDAB programme”.

Generally, it has been found that teachers have difficulty explaining English verb tenses because of differences between learners’ L1 and L2. Towell and Hawkins (1994:7) argued that one of the observable phenomena of SLA is transfer of properties of the L1 grammar into the L2. This transfer involves all linguistic levels from phonetics and phonology (pronunciation), syntax (the construction of sentences), morphology (the internal structure of words) and lexicon (vocabulary) to discourse (the communicative use that sentences are put to). In the present study, there are no differences between the present and past tenses in the learners’ L1. In the future tense, the word *akan* is added in front of the verb. For example,

(1) Simple Present Tense:

Zali berjalan ke sekolah.

Zali walks to school.

(2) Simple Past Tense:

Zali berjalan ke sekolah.

Zali walked to school.

(3) Simple Future Tense:

Zali akan berjalan ke sekolah.

Zali will walk to school.

Differences in the learners L1 and L2 are also obvious in the continuous, perfect and perfect continuous form of the tenses. In order to address these differences, the following research questions have been formulated for the purpose of the study:

1. Is there a difference in learners' acquisition of English tenses before and after the use of the T-Chronometer?
2. To what extent has the T-Chronometer been helpful in the acquisition of English tenses?

3. The Method

This is a pilot research study that uses the quantitative method for analysis. The instruments were designed based on the objectives and the research questions of the study. Statistical tools were then used for the purpose of data analysis. This would help in drawing a conclusion for the study.

3.1 Participants

There were 21 participants selected by means of the convenient sampling method. They were all lecturers who attended the "English Teaching and Learning Enhancement for the MDAB programme" workshop. The lecturers had at least a basic degree in the teaching of English as a second language. They range from part time lecturers to full time lecturers and the age group is from above twenty years of age to fifty years of age. While a number had less than 5 years teaching experience, a few had at least more than 10 years of teaching experience. The demographics are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Participants' demographics.

PARTICULARS	PERCENTAGE (%)
1. Gender:	
Male	9.5
Female	90.5
2. Race:	
Malay	90.5
Non-malay	9.5
3. Age:	
20-30 years old	76.2
31-50 years old	14.3
Above 50 years old	9.5
4. Qualifications:	
Bachelor Degree	71.4
Masters	28.6
5. Teaching Experience:	
Less than 5 years	81.0
More than 5 years	19.0

3.2 Instruments

The instruments consist of a pre and post test, use of the T-C instrument as well as an interview session.

3.2.1 The Pre test and Post test

There were 3 parts to the pre and post tests. Part A consisted of 10 identify the verb tense items. 1 mark is awarded for each correct answer. Part B consisted of 10 MCQ (multiple choice question) items. 1 mark is awarded for each correct answer. Part C consisted of 10 spot the error items. 1 mark is awarded for each correct answer. The total mark for all the items is 30 marks. This is then converted to percentages. Sample of the test questions can be found in Appendix 1.

3.2.2 The T-Chronometer

The T-Chronometer is a prototype teaching tool. The face is divided into three parts which are present, past and future. It is similar to a clock. However, a normal clock is divided into twelve parts to indicate numbers one to twelve. The T-Chronometer is only divided into three parts: past, present and future. It has twelve subparts while the ordinary clock has sixty subparts to indicate minutes. The normal clock has two needles indicating time (the long hand showing minutes and the short hand showing hours). The T-Chronometer has one needle indicating time, namely, Verb. Understanding this concept would help the learners to use the T-Chronometer in their application of time in English texts. The T-Chronometer is used with a table of formulas on tenses as shown in Appendix 2.

3.2.3 Interview session

The participants were randomly selected for the interview session. There were 5 participants who were interviewed individually. They were asked about how they felt using the T-Chronometer in their classroom lessons and whether it was feasible to induce this method in their teaching of English tenses.

3.3 Procedure

The participants were asked to sit for the pre-test at the beginning of the workshop. Then they were taught the method of teaching English tenses using the T-C. Memory and application tasks were given such as quizzes, drawing their own T-C and mock teaching. The workshop lasted for four hours. At the end of the workshop, the participants were asked to do the post-test. Data was collected from both the pre and post test.

After the data were collected, the researcher ran the data against the SPSS statistical tool using the T-Test for comparison of the pre-test and post-test. It is assumed that if the participants were to perform at a level that is equivalent for both the pre test and post test, the use of the T-Chronometer would not prove significant for the acquisition of English tenses. If they were able to perform better after being exposed to the concept of the T-Chronometer, it would mean that the T-Chronometer is applicable for use in the teaching of English verb tenses.

4 Data Analysis

The SPSS statistical tool was used to provide a detailed analysis for the data collected.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis

	pretestscore	posttestscore
N	Valid	21
	Missing	0
Mean	1.3333	1.1429
Std. Deviation	.48305	.35857

Table 2 shows the analysis of the Pre and Post tests. There were 21 participants but only 21 were valid and used for this study. The scores were tabulated as follows:

1 = 8-10 marks (Good)

2 = 5-7 marks (Average)

3 = 0-4 marks (Poor)

The mean score for the Pre test was 1.3333 which is skewed towards the lower average group score. The mean score for the Post test was 1.1429 which is skewed towards the upper average group score. The results indicate that the Post test score is slightly better than the Pre test score.

The Pre test scores are described in table 3 and figure 1 below.

Table 3: Pre test Scores

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
8-10	14	66.7	66.7	66.7
Valid 5-7	7	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	21	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 shows the Pre Test scores. The table shows a 66.7% mean score for participants scoring between 8 – 10 marks and a 33.3% mean score for participants scoring between 5 – 7 marks. This means that majority of the participants fall in the 8– 10 ‘Good’ score group for the Pre test. This can be further described in Figure 1.

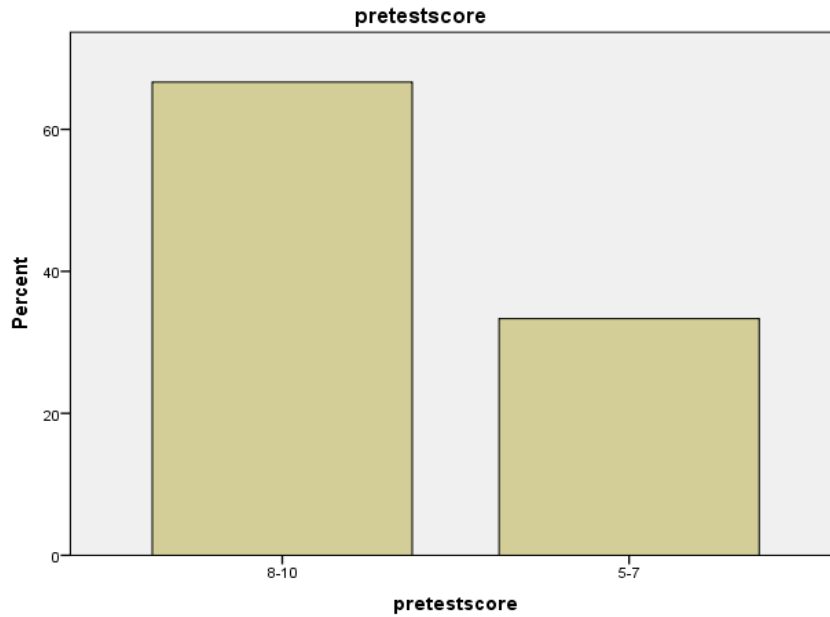


Figure 1: Bar Chart of Pre Test Scores

Figure 1 shows the bar chart for the Pre test scores. The results show that more than 60% of the participants were able to score between 8 -10 marks.

The Post test scores are described in table 4 and figure 2 below.

Table 3: Post test Scores

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
8-10	18	85.7	85.7	85.7
Valid 5-7	3	14.3	14.3	100.0
Total	21	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 shows the Post test scores. The table shows a 85.7% mean score for participants scoring between 8 – 10 marks and a 14.3% mean score for participants scoring between 5 – 7 marks. This means that majority of the participants fall in the 8 – 10 ‘Good’ score group for the Post test. This can be further described in Figure 2.

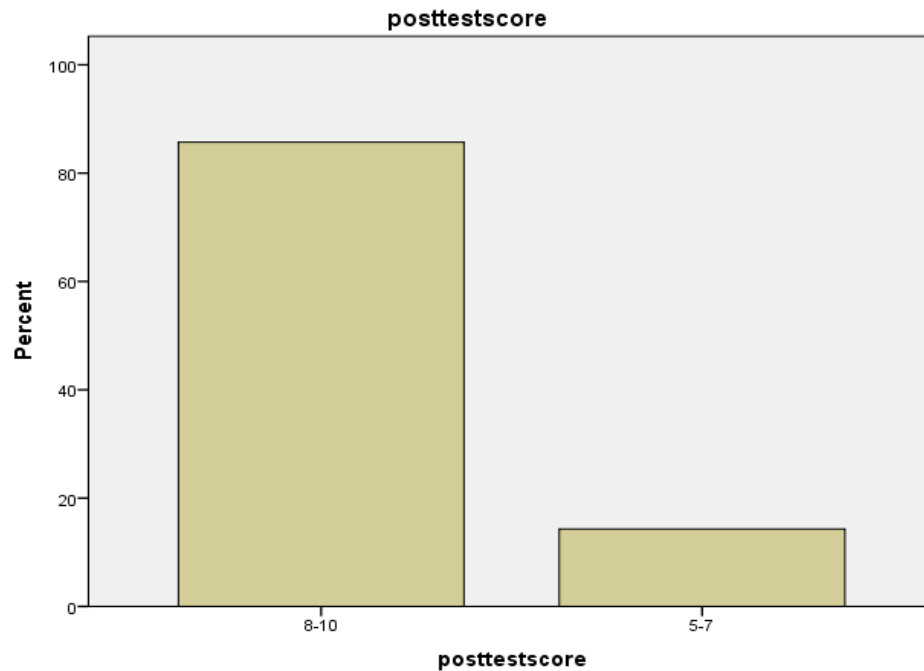


Figure 2: Bar Chart of Post Test Scores

Figure 2 shows the bar chart for the Post test scores. The results show that more than 80% of the participants were able to score between 8 -10 marks.

Figure 1 and 2 above show the Pre and Post test scores of the participants. Comparatively, the participants scored better for the Post test.

A further test was run to see the significance of the Pre and Post tests. The results of the tests are as follows:

Table 4: Paired Samples T-Test for the Pre and Post Test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretestscore	1.3333	21	.48305	.10541
	posttestscore	1.1429	21	.35857	.07825

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 pre & post	91	.014	.896

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 pre - post	.43956	.93344	.09785	.24516	.63396	4.492	90	.000

Table 4 shows the results of the Paired Samples T-Test. A Paired Samples T-test usually compares the means of two variables with the assumption that both variables are normally distributed.

In table 4, it can be seen that the Pre test mean score is higher than the Post test score. This means that the Post test performance is better than the Pre test performance. Further, the significance value is less than .05 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, there is a significant difference between the Pre and Post tests.

5 Conclusion

The problem of English verb tenses in the ESL classrooms has to be approached using inventive, creative and innovative methods in order to inject a fresh learning environment to traditional rules of grammar. The T-Chronometer has proven

although not in a wide scale its potential to tap this most difficult area of learning. Is there a difference in learners' acquisition of English tenses before and after the use of the T-Chronometer? The result of the Pre and Post test taken before and after the use of the T-Chronometer showed that there was a significant difference in performance ($p < 0.05$). Bearing in mind that the participants for the research were all ESL lecturers teaching a particular course code, the participants would have solid foundation of English. The results showed a 19% increase in their performance.

The extent of the T-Chronometer's use in helping learners acquire the English tenses can be seen through the learners' performance and the feedback from the interview session. The learners' performance was positive. The feedback from the interview showed that they felt that it could improve their teaching and help their students in the learning of English tenses. They felt that the T-Chronometer was an easy, simple and practical product to introduce to the class. They also said that it would further help in other learning skills like speaking and writing of sentences.

Thus, the acquisition of verb tenses among ESL lecturers showed that there is improvement with the use of the T-Chronometer. It is therefore recommended that this method of teaching be introduced in the classroom to help lecturers help their students in their acquisition of verb tenses.

5.1 Limitations

This was a pilot study to test the usage of the T-Chronometer in the acquisition of English tenses. Although the results were positive, it does not reflect a whole community as the number of respondents were small (N=21). The study could therefore be extended to a greater number of respondents from different age groups and proficiency levels in the use of the T-Chronometer for the acquisition of English tenses. The tests could also be diversified with greater number of questions on the different types of tenses for a more accurate finding.

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Appendix 1

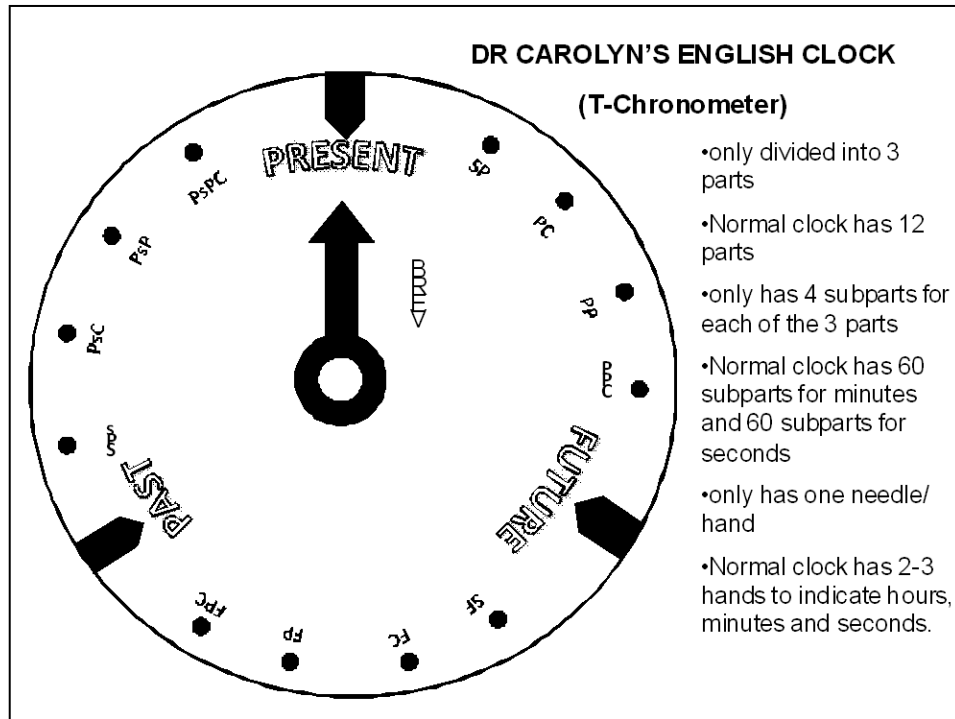
Sample questions

1. They are cycling to school.
 - a. past continuous tense
 - b. present continuous tense
 - c. future continuous tense

2. The boy has finished his homework.
 - a. present continuous tense
 - b. present perfect tense
 - c. present perfect continuous tense

3. The children will be going to the cinema.
 - a. present continuous tense
 - b. past perfect continuous tense
 - c. future continuous tense

Appendix 2 (a)



Appendix 2 (b)

The T-Chronometer Chart

Nos.	TYPE	TENSE	FORMULA	EXAMPLE
PRESENT TENSE				
1.	SP	Simple	Singular = verb+s/ +es	1.He <u>walks</u> to school.
		Present	Plural = verb-s	2.They <u>walk</u> to school.
2.	PC	Present	Singular = is +(verb+ing)	1.He <u>is walking</u> to school.
		Continuous	Plural = are +(verb+ing)	2.They <u>are walking</u> to school.
3.	PP	Present	Singular = has + participle	1.He <u>has walked</u> to school.
		Perfect	Plural = have + participle	2.They <u>have walked</u> to school.

4.	PPC	Present	Singular = has been	1.He <u>has been walking</u> to
		Perfect	+(verb+ing)	school.
		Continuous	Plural = have been	2.They <u>have been walking</u> to
			+(verb+ing)	school.

PAST TENSE

5.	SPs	Simple Past	Singular	} verb+ed / irregular verb	1.He <u>walked</u> to school.
			Plural		2.They <u>walked</u> to school.
6.	PsC	Past	Singular = was	+(verb+ing)	1.He <u>was walking</u> to school.
		Continuous	Plural = were	+(verb+ing)	2.They <u>were walking</u> to school.
7.	PsP	Past Perfect	Singular	} had + participle	1. He <u>had walked</u> to school.
			Plural		2.They <u>had walked</u> to school.
8.	PsPC	Past Perfect	Singular	} had been + (verb+ing)	1. He <u>had been walking</u> to
		Continuous	Plural		school.
					2.They <u>had been walking</u> to
					school.

FUTURE TENSE

9.	SF	Simple	Singular	} will + verb	1.He <u>will walk</u> to school.
		Future	Plural		2.They <u>will walk</u> to school.
			Singular = is going to +		1.He <u>is going to walk</u> to school.
			verb		2.They <u>are going to walk</u> to
			Plural = are going to + verb		school.
10.	FC	Future	Singular	} will be +	1.He <u>will be walking</u> to school.

		Continuous	Plural	(verb+ing)	2.They <u>will be walking</u> to school.
11.	FP	Future	Singular	} will have + participle	1.He <u>will have walked</u> to school.
		Perfect	Plural		2.They <u>will have walked</u> to school.
12.	FPC	Future	Singular	} will have been + (verb+ing)	1.He <u>will have been walking</u> to school.
		Perfect	Plural		2.They <u>will have been walking</u> to school.
		Continuous			
