ABSTRACT
In learning a language, grammar is the most difficult to master because grammar is what most learners think language is. An empirical study was done to 27 students in Mts. Muhammad Basiuni Imran Sambas. A detailed analysis was done to 50 students’ answer sheets which produced by the students. The students’ answer sheets were collected from 20 items of multiple choice and 30 items changing sentences form in simple past tense. The analysis indicated that many students still have low understanding and also have difficulty when they constructing sentences using simple past tense. Quantitative descriptive analysis indicate that students’ difficulty occured chiefly on the use of verb, misplacing the linking verb, using auxiliary in verbal sentence and misuse of singular and plural subject.

Keywords: students’ difficulty, writing, grammar, simple past tense.

INTRODUCTION
“In the study of language, grammar occupies a central position” (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002, p.6). All the language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are linked directly to the grammar. The grammar is needed to produce a language correctly.

The study of grammar is very often connected to rules of grammar (Hirai, Cook, Borrego, Garza, & Kloock, 2010). “When we write, we build written structures, using words as our materials in writing. Our language is functional, constructed from the world around us and refined by corrections” (Fillmore,
It is similar when we construct a building. We need to know the materials that will be used. In writing it is often the same, grammar here is the kind of materials to make a well composition.

Azar in Hirai et al. (2010) talked about grammar-based teaching, which needs to be taught simultaneously with language acquisition. It means to acquire a language we also have to know the grammar. Both cannot be taught separately. A wrong writing structure will lead into wrong meaning. As Hudson (2003) claimed “separating grammar and meaning may sound back-to-front, given the obvious fact that we use grammar in order to express meaning” (p.8). When we ignore the grammar the meaning of our writing will be unclear (Hinkle, 2003).

Writing is one of English skills which need deep grammar comprehension in it. One of the grammar aspects that are crucial in writing is tenses. There is no writing without tenses, because tenses cover all writing structures. Tense itself is the form of verb that indicates the changing of time (Booij, 2007, p.134). Every academic writings cannot be separated to the tenses. The tenses indicate events that occur in different time. To make a good composition, the students must be able to master and apply the structure correctly, especially the use of tense. If they cannot do that, of course, mistakes will occur.

One of tenses that many in use is simple past tense. The tense is used in many academic writing, but most of students still find problems in using the tenses, because of their limited mastery, especially the irregular verb (Cody, 2006, p.17) and also low understanding about simple past tense.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING

Writing is form of expressing ideas on paper (Hutchinson, 2005, p.5). It presents a language through visual symbol (Patel & Jain, 2008, p.125). When people need to talk about something, but they cannot express their ideas in spoken language, the ideas can be poured into written form. That is what writing is.

The writing is also the form of communication between writer and audience (Clark, 2008, p.7). It is a complex process involving the construction of recorded messages on paper or on some other material. By writing we can communicate with others when we are not at the same place or at the same time,
but still we can communicate. People can read books, newspapers, or even personal letters written two or three hundred years ago or people can send and receive letter far away even in different country. Those things we can call as communication as long as the writer and reader have messages to be informed. That is why the writing can be implied as a form communication as Burns & Sinfield (2004) claimed “we also stress that effective writing is about communication” (p.137).

The writing system uses set of symbols to represent the sounds of speech, and may also have symbols for such things, such as punctuation and numerals (Khendall & Khuan, 2006; Patel & Jain, 2008). The set things are covered by grammar and also needed to create a good writing. According to Clark (2008) the conception of good writing is emphasized the grammatical correctness, tight organization, and a straightforward prose style (p.115). It shows that the grammatical aspect cannot be separated to the writing.

The use of writing in learning has no surprisingly (Brown, 2000, p.334). While Patel & Jain (2008) claimed “writing is essential features of learning a language because it provides a very good means of foxing the vocabulary, spelling, and sentence pattern” (p.125). The both stressed that in academic learning, writing is an essential features that cannot be separated as can be seen in daily learning activities, a teacher write material in blackboard then students taking note, this almost occurs everyday in any school. That is simple example how crucial writing in academic learning is.

Writing not only an important skill in academic learning not or in communication aspect, but it is also an important skill that translates into any career field. Nearly all professions require some form of writing on the job. For example, doctors and nurses write medical reports on patients; accountants and business managers create financial reports; engineers and software technicians write instruction sheets and user manuals; nearly every worker in all business fields composes emails and other forms of written information for customers, clients, and workers. Ultimately, the number of job tasks that require writing is countless.
Concept of writing

Ideas

Writing is built from ideas. If you want to write but you do not have any ideas it sounds impossible to conduct your writing, because writing is ideas that poured in written from (Hutchinson, 2005, p.5). To express your ideas, there are many ways that can be used such as combining words and many styles that can be used (Cody, 2006, p.8). “You may have the best ideas in the world, but if you can’t get them across in writing, no one will ever act on your great ideas” (Olson, 2009, p.147). In building idea, writer needs a list of powerful words, including vocabulary (Khendall & Khuan, 2006, p.77) and then linking the ideas in organization.

Organization

Every writing target is readers, that is why, at the final draft of your writing it should be more readable so that readers easily catch your ideas. When you conduct your writing, you need to organize them in order making your writing more informative and more readable. On the top point in the organizations is organizing your ideas into sentence and sentences into paragraphs. “Well-organised paragraphs not only help readers understand the argument; they also help writers to structure their ideas effectively” (Bailey, 2011, p.32).

Vocabulary

A good vocabulary can help us say what we mean. In writing it is also the same. If you do not have a strong vocabulary, you may also find it difficult to choose the best word for a sentence when you’re writing. If you have several synonyms (words with similar meanings) in your mind, you will be able to choose the best word for the job. Try to avoid vague or unclear words when you write. These words do not give the reader a good sense of your meaning. Also, use strong verbs that give the reader good information.
Grammar

Every writing needs grammar, the grammar instruction is most naturally integrated during the revising, editing, and checking the use of phases. Writing well definitely requires using a good grammar (Cody, 2006, p.80). If you don’t know the parts of speech, the names of punctuation marks, and all the other components of language and writing, how can you conduct your writing and organize your ideas to convince your readers. Those is all are related to good grammar. To make a good composition we must learn how to write well such as linking of idea to idea to make a complete thought, linking sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into whole compositions.

Convention

We can define conventions as a set of generally accepted standards for written English. We use conventions to make our writing more readable (Khendall & Khuan, 2006, p.10). In other words, we do things in a certain way so the reader can figure out what we are trying to say. The conventions itself include spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar and usage and sentence structure (Khendall & Khuan, 2006, p.96). When we write, we are expected to apply spelling rules correctly, use the correct punctuation to smoothly guide the reader through the paper, use verb tenses correctly, write sentences that express complete thoughts and demonstrate paragraph organization and use smooth transitions. It is done to make our writing more readable that makes the readers understand our idea easily.

STUDENTS’ DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING

Writing is one of the subjects that taught in English. ”Some learners are able to say what they want to write but have difficulty in putting it into written form” (Nation, 2009, p.119). When we write, we need to bring experience and knowledge to our writing (Nation, 2009, p.93). Those things cannot be separated when we built our writing. “One of the biggest blocks in writing is a lack of ideas” (Nation, 2009, p.117). Idea is one of main parts in writing, without ideas
we cannot write anything. We do not know what we are going to write, because the writing is built from ideas.

Different students can have different difficulties and problems in learning English. They can make different mistakes in English pronunciation, grammar, writing and vocabulary usage. Like all learning problems, difficulties in writing can be decrease to the students’ education and self-esteem. As student progress through school, they are increasingly expected to express what they know about many different subjects through writing.

When we talk about writing, there must be grammar in it. The both things are related to each other. If there is a problem with learning writing, it must indicate a need for more grammar (Wajnryb, 1990, p.13). Most of the difficulties on writing occur in putting or maintaining letters, processes, or ideas in order. By identifying such difficulties, it would help teachers find ways of overcoming them and provide effective grammar instruction.

The Importance Of Grammar

Grammar is very important within the English since it is in effect of the language itself. By using incorrect grammar such uses of verb tenses, word order, subordinating clauses, passive voice and impersonal constructions will obscure the text’s meaning (Hinkle, 2004, p.24). It means that you are not able to communicate effectively and the person who is reading your work may be quite confused to your meaning.

Often the learners think that grammar is the main problem of English and the most difficult (Wajnryb, 1990). It is not hard to understand how this opinion is formed. “Grammar is what most learners think language is. If there is a problem with learning the language, then it must indicate a need for more grammar” (Wajnryb, 1990, p.13). “Grammar is informed by the theoretical and methodological framework of functional” (Kortmann, Herrmann, Pietsch & Wagner, 2005, p.1) which is sentence, word formation, the use of be and tense including in it. In the effect, grammar is the way in which sentences are structured and the language is formatted (Hirai, et al.,2010), so it may be considered a bit boring to study correct grammar, it really waste the time and
effort because to know the grammar well we need a deep comprehension. In other side, if you don’t know the rules of English grammar, then you will never be able to communicate clearly and effectively in English.

Students’ difficulties in grammar

“Students whose first language is not English often have significant difficulties with some aspects of English grammar that are distinct from the problems that native English speakers have” (Coffin et al., 2003, p.32). One of the grammar aspects is tense. “Much earlier research has demonstrate that, in general, English tenses are often difficult for L2 learners to use appropriately” (Guiora 1983; Hinkel 1992, 1997; Riddle, 1986; Sharwood Smith & Rutherford, 1998 in Hinkle, 2004, p.134). When we talk tense in grammar, there are 16 tenses, each tense has own function to describe events by time changing. By the various tenses it might confuse learners in use. In the tenses shifting, there are elements that students need to pay more attention. They are verb changing, the use of appropriate to be, auxiliary, and linking verb.

The mistakes in the use of tenses is familiar problems in the quality of academic L2 writing (Horowitz, 1986a; John, 1981; Ostler, 1980; Reid, 1993; Santos 1998, Van et al., 1984, 1991; Vaughan, 1991 in Hinkle, 2004, p.134). One of the tenses which always become the problem of Indonesian learners is simple past tense. This is tense that many taught in schools, starting from elementary school, junior hight school till the senior hight school, this subject also including in the curriculum. In this tense the student will face verb shifting in past participle form, further more in the irregular verb, the past participle is quite different from infinitive. “These irregularities occur chiefly in a few hundred common words, and cause the main difficulties of spelling the English language” (Cody, 2006, p.17).
DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING USING SIMPLE PAST TENSE

Manokaran, Ramalingan & Adriana (2013) studied on the use of past tense of Malaysian learners. The research identified seven types of mistakes made by the students in their writing which are tense shifting, agreement, missing auxiliary be, wrong verb form, addition and mis-formation and misordering. The participants also found difficulty in applying the correct tense to the verbs in their sentences. Pratami (2008) studied on improving students’ grammar proficiency of simple past tense in writing, the research also showed that the participants didn’t know how to form regular and irregular verb. Widiastuti (2003) studied on the difficulties in mastering the simple past tense, the research found that students’ had difficulties on the use of auxiliaries, adverbial, the agreement between subject and verbs, negative form and interrogative form, and the use of regular and irregular verb.

Based on the previous research, in writing using simple past tense, the difficulties on grammar became the top issue, then followed by auxiliary, adverbial of time, forming the irregular verb, the appropriate subject, negative and interrogative form. In learning a language, the grammatical knowledge and tense is the most critical and difficult part for ESL learners to master (Muftah & Rafic in Manokaran et al., 2013, p.2). In this case, learners have to understand the verb changing base on the tenses. It might quite complicate learners consider in English there are 16 tenses in nominal and verbal form (except continuous tense). In this case, the student will face to the verbs shifting, then choosing the appropriate to be for each different subject.

One of the tense problems that encountered by Indonesian learners learning English is simple past tense. This is because Indonesian language does not have the past form of the verbs such in English. The past participle (English verb in past form and sometimes Verb 2) is formed by all of the verbs in English. The verb itself is divided into two forms that is regular and irregular verb. To forming the regular verbs we only attach suffix “-d” or “-ed” at the end of infinitive, but in irregular we cannot attach the suffix to forming past participle such in regular verbs. This is because the infinitive and past participle form is quite different in spelling. For that, there is no pattern that we can use to form it. It means that every learners need to memorize all the words.
METHOD

In collecting the data, the researcher used measurement technique. “Measurement is a systematic process for categorizing and quantifying the attributes we want to study” (Colton & Covert, 2007, p.60). The measurement in this research was test. “A test is a collection of items developed to measure some human educational or psychological attribute” (Worthen & Sanders, 1987 in Colton & Covert, 2007, p.7). This technique was applied to collect the data by administrated the written test form. The types of written tests administrated to students were multiple choice and changing sentences form (positive, negative and interrogative) in simple past tense.

After students had finished the test, the researcher checked the students’ work. Both the correct and incorrect answers were given different check marks, so that it was easy to be classifying, then scored it and see how many mistake that students made on the test which was given. Then, classified the students’ answers which items the correct and which items the incorrect one. Then, researcher analyzed what kind of mistake which students made. Since the research purpose was to find out the students’ mistake in writing using simple past tense, so that the researcher focused on analyzing the incorrect answer. The researcher analyzed the mistake based on the mistakes classification, source of the mistakes and how the mistakes were occurred.

FINDINGS

The first test consist of 20 items multiple choice. The second test was conducted in changing sentence form which consisted of 15 questions, each question students need to provide 2 answers. It means students need to provide 30 answers at all (15 multiple by 2). Students answered correctly 65.74% the first test, then 52.10 % on the second test. It means 34.26% mistake occurred on the first test and 47.90% mistakes occurred on the second test. According to the KKM (Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal “The Minimum of Learning Criteria”) students passed particular subject if she or he achieve score of 72.00 or more. The average of the score is 58.22 which means the average is still below the KKM. From the test result, indicate that only 8 students who pass the KKM.
When students were asked on the use subject in simple past tense, 41 mistakes or 50.62% were occurred. It is a big number for these simple questions. In this case, students were only asked to distinguish the use of singular and plural subject but, they are still confused which one was singular and which one was the plural one. Then, 44.44% mistakes occurred on the use of adverb of time. These consist of time signal in simple past tense. Past full verb, 30% mistakes were occurred, this section contains 10 items of regular and irregular verb, the students were only asked to identify which one the regular and which one is the irregular. The last section is the use of linking verb, the total mistakes of this section were 25%. Here the students were asked to know where they need to maintain the linking verb and they were also asked to differ between linking verb and auxiliary in use.

The table shows that most of the mistakes occurred in using irregular verb. It was 60.08%. The mistakes were made by students with its variation such as adding –e/ed at the end of irregular verb, using verb 1 in constructing positive sentence, using verb 2 in constructing negative and interrogative sentence, misplaced linking verb (did/did not), using auxiliary (was/were) in verbal sentence etc. The mistakes also occurred on regular verb, this was about 29.63%,
this mistake occurred similar to the previous case that is using verb 1 in constructing positive sentence, using verb 2 in constructing negative and interrogative sentence, misplaced linking verb (did/did not), using auxiliary (was/were) in verbal sentence. On the use of verb, the mistake which students made was 37.57 %. The following sample were the students’ mistakes when they constructing positive sentences using simple past tense.

#9 She *writed* a letter for her mother
#12 My mother *sayed* one word only.
#14 The police *catched* the thief.

From the examples above can be seen that mistake happened on the use the irregular verb. They attached –d/ed at the end of irregular verb. This mistake almost the same for students who answer the item incorrectly, it means that they have similar difficulties that is low understanding about the use of the verb. Another mistake occurred was using verb 1 in constructing positive sentences in simple past tense. The rule in constructing simple past tense in positive verbal form, we have to use verb 2 as the predicate, but several students still used the verb 1. Of course we can judge it was a mistake. Here are the samples of students’ mistake in constructing sentences using simple past tense in positive verbal form.

#10 He *live* here in 1998.
#12 my mother *say* one word only.
#15 They *tell* me the story.

When students were asked to change sentence form into negative, 41.20 % mistakes in using appropriate verb occurred. Another mistake that also occurred was misplacing the linking verb (did not/didn’t). They put the linking verb before the subject, but actually the case they have to put it before the verb.

#1 He didn’t *droved* his car fast
#2 They didn’t *arrived* here at 09.00
#3 The tourist didn’t *enjoyed* their trip to Bali. Etc.
#3 The *didn’t* tourist enjoy their trip to Bali.
#4 The *didn’t* criminal deny the murder.
#6 The *didn’t* servant felt up to it.

The mistakes occurred to 10 students which have similar characteristic mistakes on different questions. Another mistakes also occurred is using auxiliary
in verbal sentences. This is made by 5 students. These are the following students’
answer sheets.

#3 The tourist was not enjoy their trip to Bali
#4 The criminal was not deny the murder.
#6 The servant were not feel up to it.

When students were asked to construct interrogative sentences, mistakes
were also occurred. These mistakes chiefly occurred on the use of verb. The
other mistake that also occurred was the misplaced of auxiliary verb, this mistake
occurred on 16 items. The students confused when they need to use auxiliary and
they need to use the linking verb.

#1 Did he drove his car fast?
#2 Did they arrived here at 09.00?
#3 Did she wrote a letter for her mother?
#12 Did my mother said one word only?
#3 Was the tourist enjoy their trip to Bali?
#4 Was the criminal deny the murder?
#6 Were the servant feel to it?
#7 Was Mr. Henry teach English?
#12 Was my mother said one word only?
#13 Were the thief enter to the room?

DISCUSSION

Difficulties in Understanding Simple Past Tense.

More than half still have difficulties in using the correct subject in simple past tense. It was only 5 students who answer all the item (item number 2,3 & 4) correctly. When flash back to the test item, the item only differ on the use of singular and plural subject. It can be concluded that when students have difficulties when they differ the use of singular and plural subject in simple past tense.

Then, the use adverb of time, they also show significant number of mistake. There were 44.44% items were answered incorrectly. When flash back to the items (item number 1,5, & 6) the students were asked to find out the common adverb or time signal of simple past tense. For such simple question only 3 students who answered the items all correct.

On the use of verb, 68.52% mistakes occured or 185 items were answered incorrectly. This part contained 10 items (item number 11 - 20). This also occurred by overgeneralization of irregular verb. As stated on data presentation that many students attached “-d or –ed” at the end of the irregular verb. It was no
mistake if Mourssi (2012, p. 6) stated that “overgeneralization of the regular –ed form to irregular forms is a case in point” (p. 6).

The last is the use of auxiliary and linking verb, this mistake chiefly occurred on misordering linking verb or auxiliary. Harmaka (2003, p. 61) claimed that misordering occurred if there is wrong replacement of some words. On the use of linking and auxiliary verb, 25% mistake was occurred. On the items (item number 7, 8, 9 & 10), 27 mistakes made by all students. The question is all about the use of auxiliary and linking verb and where we need to place them in sentence.

Difficulties In Constructing Positive Sentence

It can be seen that the difficulties dominantly occur on the use of verb 2. There were 25% on test item I or 27 mistakes occurred and 37.57% or 71 items were answered incorrectly from test item II. The difficulties in constructing positive sentence are dominantly by the use of verb. Cody (2006, p.17) said that the common problem in learning simple past tense is because of their limited mastery, especially the irregular verb. However, this research found that the difficulties not only the use of irregular verb, but also chiefly occurred on the use of regular verb. That is why, it could not be concluded that irregulars are harder than regulars (McDonald & Roussel, 2010, p.12).

Difficulties In Constructing Negative Sentence

It can be seen that 41.20% mistakes occurred on the use of verb. Simply, 89 items answered incorrectly. As stated before, the students were still difficult to distinguish when they need to use verb 1 or verb 2 when they writing using simple past tense. The other difficulties that occurred when they writing using simple past tense was distinguish the use of auxiliary and linking verb. This occurred on 7.08% or 17 items. When flash back to the sample of mistakes and analyzed the students answer, it can be concluded that the students still finding difficulty in distinguishing which one the verbal sentences and which one the nominal one. It can be proofed when they produced the verbal sentences and there were 5 students used auxiliary (was not/were not) not linking verb (did not) when they constructing verbal sentences.
Another difficulty that the writer found was misordering the linking verb. This is similar cases with Manokaran et al. (2013) finding on the study of Malaysian ESL learners. This research found that the misordering occurred to 10 students. Those students made the total mistakes 38 items or 17.59%. When the writer analyzed the students’ answer, the mistake which occurred among students in Mts. Muhammad Basiuni Imran Sambas had similarity, that was misordering the linking verb, simply they put the linking before the subject.

**Difficulties In Constructing Interrogative Sentence**

The difficulty in constructing interrogative sentences is still the same from the previous sections that is dominated by the use of verb. 28.15% mistakes occurred on this section. There were only 3 students who answered this section all correct. It means 24 students answered the items incorrectly. When the writer rechecked the students answer sheet, the mistakes that occurred had similarity. That is used verb 2 in constructing the interrogative sentences, but actually the case is used verb 1 in constructing the sentence.

Another difficulty that the writer found was the use of auxiliary (was/were) when they conducted verbal sentences. This was occurred to the 4 students and their answer had similarity and the last was misplaced the linking verb and this is occurred to the 3 students.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The research result presented only 7 students of 27 who passed the KKM or only 25.92%. From the result, it can be concluded that the students’ achievements were not satisfactory. Based on the research finding, the students’ difficulties were occurred chiefly on the use of verb. It included the use of regular, irregular verb, which almost occurred to all students. The another difficulties that researcher found were misplacing the linking verb, using of auxiliary in verbal sentence and the use of subject, students also confused when they need to use the nominal or verbal sentences in simple past tense.

Considering to the research finding, the simple past tense consists of rules and a little complicated for students, the researcher suggest that: (1) Teacher needs to explain the material step by step and give some more attention to the students’ progress by giving the guidance as well as possible, become more
creative in making the class alive and interesting so that the students not feeling stressed to the material which given; and (2) The students should be active in learning English by doing more exercises both at school and home, tries to work with friends, tries to share knowledge, become active participants in class, if found problems in learning, don’t be shame to post a question and if make a mistake, learn from it.

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