

An Investigation on the Metalinguistic Competence of Indonesian Students in Acquiring the English Tense-Aspect System

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Abstract: This study addresses how well Indonesian second language learners of English apply the English tense-aspect system. Further, the present study attempts to investigate and better understand the process of making sense of the English tenses and aspects the students have applied in their academic writing. Thus, error analysis procedure is employed to see whether the students have applied correct tenses and aspects in a relevant context. Subsequently, quantitative analysis was conducted involving sixteen pieces of the student writings. Employing the procedure of Error Analysis (Corder, 1981), this study focuses on the covert errors that the students frequently made, which allow in-depth investigation beyond the grammatical errors. Additionally, to see a pedagogical implication of this research, a correlation between the number of errors and the score obtained from the writings were also investigated. The results revealed that the students' attitude toward the use of tenses and aspects in an academic context is considerably low. It was frequently found that the students employed a particular tense and aspect in an irrelevant context. Also, a weak correlation between the two variables measured, the number of errors and scores, was revealed.

Keyword: *Academic Writing, English tense-aspect system, Error Analysis, Covert Error*

Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that has revealed some potential challenges the second language learners continually face in applying grammar rules in English (Zhou, 2009; Gardiner, 2012). In her survey, Gardiner (2012, p. 11) found that some students “express dissatisfaction in relation to effective expression of ideas and grammar in preparation for their future studies”. Correspondingly, a study conducted by Zhou (2009) investigating second language learners' goal in improving grammar and vocabulary in writing found that the students admit that it is hard to meet the characteristic of the academic writing concerning the dense vocabulary and complex grammatical structures. These findings confirm that grammar, understandably, has become a challenge for second language learners even after learning it for several years. With respect to this issue, Matsumoto and Dobs (2017) argue that the English tense-aspect is one of the most challenging grammatical aspects the L2 learners deal with. Some distinct aspects in both cross-cultural and cross-linguistic concepts of time between the learners' first language and second language, in this case, English, seems to trigger them in applying the systems.

Several studies have revealed that L2 learners from different nationalities have faced some problems in applying the English tense-aspect system. A study conducted by Ionin and Wexler (2004) exploring the application of the English article by Russian and Korean L2 learners of English found that the challenge of applying a correct article comes along with a problem in applying the subject-verb agreement of copula be and suffix -s. The same problem is found in Malay L2 learners of English, where some grammatical errors were often found when they deal with thematic verbs due to lack of including past, finite and agreement in their L1 (Eng, 2012). Additionally, the errors found in applying the English tenses and aspects by second language learners are not restricted to a grammatical problem. Some studies found that the L2 learners of

English often misuse, or even overuse, a particular tense and aspect in an irrelevant context. Collins (2007) found that French-speaking learners of English overuse present perfect tense when past tense is considerably needed. Further, she explains that one possible explanation for that finding is that French has a compound past which is similar to the English present perfect tense (Collins, 2007). In short, grammatical rules, specifically the tense-aspect related rules offer the second language learners a great challenge as it requires the learners to be able not only to apply a correct grammatical form but also to build a proper meaning-form relationship.

Considering those cases, it comes to a conclusion that learners of English with different first languages considerably face a different kind of problem so that there is a need to expand the investigation to another nationality of English learners, in this case, Indonesian students. Underlying error analysis procedure (Corder, 1981), several studies have been conducted to see some problems the students face in their language production. However, most of them focus more on the errors in the grammatical forms only. Therefore, this study aims to explore how well Indonesian students apply the English tense-aspect system by focusing on the grammatically well-formed sentences. This focus allows an in-depth investigation of whether the students have applied appropriate tenses and aspects in a relevant context.

Theoretical Review

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the second language learning and second language acquisition specifically on the English tense-aspect system. Some researchers explain that the English tense-aspect system is marked by the occurrence of inflection process on the verbs tense (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Holland et al., 2012; Eng, 2012). Also, English has three tenses (past, present and future) and four aspects (simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive), which then resulted in twelve tense-aspect combinations (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). The English tenses are able to manage considerably an extensive time; past tense expresses an event that is finished in the past, present tense represents a generalization and regular activity, while future shows a movement in the future time. Meanwhile, the English aspects involve particularly a specific time. Simple aspect represents an event as a whole complete concept, while progressive aspect promotes a development or progress of an event (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Also, perfect aspect involves a period preceding now of a particular activity, whilst perfect progressive combines the sense of incompleteness of progressive aspect with the time preceding now (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Furthermore, Bahasa has understandably different tense-aspect system compared to English. The inflection process in the English tense-aspect system technically ascertains the distinct point relating the tense-aspect system between English and Bahasa. The tense-aspect system in Bahasa is frequently marked by the use of auxiliary elements, such as *sedang*, *akan*, *sudah*, *pernah*, and temporal adverbs such as *kemaren*, *sekarang*, *besok* (Swan & Smith, 2001). Meanwhile, the inflection process in Bahasa is used to mark both passive and active voices and has nothing to do with the tenses and aspects (Ermanto, 2006). Additionally, the concept of time in Bahasa is more straightforward compared to English, which three tenses, including past, present and future, are acknowledged, but no aspect presents (Swan & Smith, 2001).

Likewise, the academic literature has highlighted the use of the English tense-aspect system in academic writing. Some researchers explain that a different part of the academic work, considerably, requires different tenses and aspects type. Generally, there are four types of tense and aspect used in academic writing, including simple present tense, present perfect, simple past

tense and future tense (Hinkel, 2004; Wallwork, 2016). Simple present tense is mostly used in academic writing to present established scientific facts, findings, definition and generalizations (Hinkel, 2004). Meanwhile, present perfect and simple past tense is frequently used to present an introduction of academic paper, a chronology of a research and literature review used. Finally, the future tense is frequently used to outline the organization of the research paper (Wallwork, 2016).

Methodology

This study was conducted to examine the metalinguistic competence of Indonesian students in applying the English tense-aspect system in their academic writing. Focusing on the analyzing the covertly idiosyncratic sentences, this study attempted to answer the main following question:

- How well do Indonesian students apply the English tense-aspect system in their academic writing?

To be able to answer the question, two detailed question were constructed:

- What type of covert errors do frequently occur in the students writing?
- Is there any correlation between the number of tense-aspect error and the score obtained from the writing?

To answer the questions above, the quantitative data analysis was conducted by adapting the error analysis procedure which was firstly proposed by Corder (1981). It involved sixteen pieces of submitted works of Indonesian students who were doing their master's program at Newcastle University. The writings were used as the main data of this study, which cover three band scores applied in the UK education system; pass, merit, distinction. The band score is used to see whether there is a correlation between the number of error and the score obtained from the writing. Meanwhile, the data analysis was begun by reading through the students' writing one by one and highlighted the covert idiosyncratic sentences which are related to the use of tenses and aspects (Corder, 1981). In other words, the data analysis allows further investigation into the sentences which are grammatically correct but considered as contextually inappropriate. After the error was detected, the sentences were picked and coded based on the tense errors to enable grouping and then describing the errors. Additionally, to maintain the validity of the error judgement and prepare the sentence reconstruction, two native speakers of English were engaged. In this stage, some sample of error sentences were picked and the verbs showing the tense used were removed and changed into to-infinitive or the original form of the verbs. Thus, the native speakers' job was likely to fill in the blank with the verbs based on the appropriate tense and aspect. The results, then, were compared to the original sentences written by the students. When the results agree to each other, then, it could be said that the sentences are correct and vice versa. Furthermore, the frequency of errors was counted in form of a raw number of errors and its percentage. Later, the frequency of errors is proceeded using the scatter plot analysis to see if there is a correlation between two variables (Larson-Hall, 2010), in this case, the number of errors and the scores.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Covert errors

No.	Sentences	Error Description
1.	The main aim of our Business <i>was to raise</i> cultural awareness and to conserve the heritage.	Overusing past tense
2.	CR <i>has been showing</i> its ability to delay ageing and prolong lifespan, reduce level of oxidative damage by reduction of ROS generation and/or accentuation of macromolecules repair in rodents' monkey.	Overusing progressive aspect
3.	It was an honor for us that the society agreed to collaborate, and even better our workshop <i>has become</i> the main part of their event called <i>Semarak</i> Festival.	Misusing perfect aspect
4.	As other feminist theorists argue that state is patriarchal structure that <i>will exclude</i> women from the system and only serves the interests of men.	Misusing future tense

The result of the data analysis revealed that there are four main findings reflecting challenges the students face during their language production, specifically in applying the English tenses and aspects in their academic writing. Those main findings reflect four types of covert errors including overusing progressive aspect and simple past tense when present tense is considerably needed as well as misusing perfect aspect and future tense. Table 1 above presents the sample of learners' language containing the four main covert errors, which are found in grammatically well-formed sentences.

Table 2. The frequency of error

Error Description	Error Frequency	Percentage
Overusing past tense	64	42.11%
Overusing progressive aspect	58	38.16
Misusing perfect aspect	16	10.53%
Misusing future tense	14	9.21%
Total	152	100%

Overusing the English past tense gets the highest frequency among the other errors with 64 times occurrences. In this case, it is assumed that the students intended meaning to apply the English past tense is to illustrate a particular activity which is not necessarily related to past time event. The fourth sentence presented in Table 1 is an example related to this issue. In that sentence, the auxiliary 'was' reflects the use of past tense which is considerably more appropriate to be written in the present tense. Considering the whole context of the writing, the genre of the text possibly affects the students' choice of tenses (Hinkel, 2004). This type of errors was frequently found in the typical reflective report, where the students need to write a report about a particular project they have done. Subsequently, the students narrated every event or activity occurring prior to writing report time using simple past tense. Some researchers have approved this paradigm that the use of simple past tense in academic writing is associated with narrative and recount text (Hinkel, 2004). However, a tendency to use simple past tense for the entire text is considered inappropriate. A reflective report involves recognizing and reflecting on the semiotic resources that interpret the existing knowledge and ideologies by providing an empirical support from theory or other similar facts (Hinkel, 2004; Achugar, Schleppegrell & Oteiza, 2007). Furthermore, the result of the reflection and evaluation could either support or object the existing norm of knowledge. Therefore, a tense shift is needed to draw a line between the narration of the activity done before, which is considerably presented using simple past tense, and the reflection as well as evaluation to the prior body of literature, which is preferably written under the simple present tense.

Regarding the second type of errors found, progressive aspect reflects an incompleteness of an event which allows a continuity of the event (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Hinkel (2004) argued that the sense of incompleteness of the progressive aspect considerably communicates a conversational sense. Therefore, it is suggested to avoid the use of this aspect in academic writing as it could weaken some essential elements of academic writing; strong hedging and caution (Hinkel, 2004). However, it is found 58 times occurrences of the progressive aspect form all files examined or 38.16% of the total errors, which occur in a combination of any tenses including past, present and future. As it can be seen in the first sentence presented in Table 1, a sample of learners' languages which is considered using an inappropriate tense-aspect combination. In that context, the present perfect is understandably more relevant to allude the sense of a period preceding now (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Additionally, a tendency of using progressive aspect successfully evidences a claim saying that the early acquisition of the English tenses and aspects is shown by a preference of using this type of aspects (Collins, 2009; Muñoz & Gilbert, 2011). A study conducted by Collins (2009), found three main factors making the progressive aspect more accessible than other aspects: frequency of the verbs occurrences, restricted the semantic scope and higher perceptual salience. Regarding the semantic category, some researchers agree that the early acquisition of progressive aspect is restricted to activity (look, use and run) and state (have, cause and expect) only (Collins, 2004; Muñoz & Gilbert, 2011). However, the result of this study shows that there is a development where the progressive aspect may also involve the two remaining semantic categories, accomplishment and achievement. This finding confirms that there is a shifting paradigm as the learners' proficiency improves which allows the second language learners to move from prototypical to peripheral associations in second language learning (Muñoz & Gilbert, 2011).

Table 3. Samples of learners' language overusing progressive aspect

No.	Sentences	Semantic Category
1.	We obtained a new perspective that creativity is relative, and many factors <i>are affecting</i> it.	Accomplishment
2.	The author <i>is expecting</i> at least 100 valid data will be collected.	State
3.	This research <i>will be using</i> quantitative research method.	Activity
4.	This test is the instrument for me to <i>be more understanding</i> of myself and from that, I know which aspect that I need to maintain or improve and also which aspect that I need to fix	Achievement

Meanwhile, in third place, the English perfect aspect appears to be problematic for the Indonesian students. In some cases, the error was found in a combination of both present perfect and past perfect. The second sentence presented in Table 1 exemplifies one of several sentences found in the students writing which could make more sense when it is written in simple past tense. Concerning the English present perfect tense, it represents the past time event which continues to occur up to the present time (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Wallwork, 2016). Meanwhile, in this context, the intended meaning of the second sentence in Table 1 is to report back the past activity which is completely finished in the past time. Taking the students' first language into account, the English present perfect with auxiliary have/has is often associated with verbal markers *sudah/pernah/telah* as past time markers in Bahasa (Swan & Smith, 2001; Soriente, 2014). However, the past time concept in Bahasa has nothing to do with the present time (Swan & Smith, 2001). Thus, one possible explanation to error is that the students might associate the English present tense is similar to the past time in Bahasa.

Lastly, the use of future tense, which displays a movement in the future (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), is usually found in introduction section in the academic text, specifically to outline the organization of the text (Wallwork, 2016). Likewise, there is a little number of errors found regarding the use of future tense in academic writing, which obtains 14 times occurrences or 9.21% of the total error found. This finding is consistent with the previous study conducted by Hinkel (2004) investigating the tenses, aspects and passive voices in L1 and L2 academic writing. Further, the data analysis revealed that some students are likely to use the tense in their main body of the text to explain and elaborate their arguments. This decision, however, is considered inappropriate in the context of academic writing. Some researchers explain that the nature of the English future tense reflects a plan or a strong prediction in the future (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Collins, 2004). Meanwhile, referring back to the third sentence presented in Table 1, the sentence implies an illustration of a consequence that might happen as a result of one particular action. It does not necessarily show a plan or an event occurring in the future as the probability of the consequences to happen is not measurable (Collins, 2004). Taking the students' first language into account, the future time in Bahasa is often marked by the use of aspectual particle *akan*. Furthermore, the word *akan* is commonly used in academic writing in Bahasa and particularly does not restrict the level of probability of something to happen. Thus, it could be one possible reason why the Indonesian students were triggered to use the future tense in the English academic writing. Additionally, Hinkel (2004), encourages the second language learners to use modal verbs, such as can, may, could and might, to express a hypothetical rhetorical argument instead of the future tense. Further, the modal verbs are considered as a proper operating academic hesitation and caution in elaborating an argument.

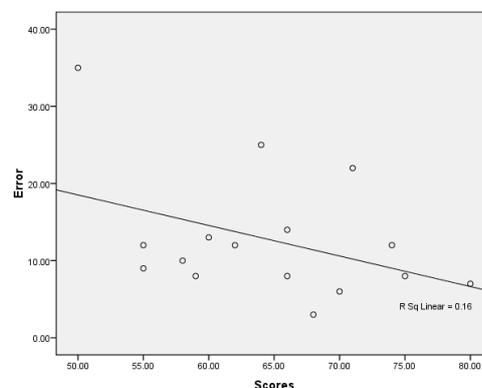


Figure 1. Scatter plot analysis result

Considering the pedagogical aspect, the result of the investigation on the correlation between the frequency of errors and the score shows that the assumption that there could be a strong negative correlation that is not proven. Two variables are correlated with each other when the value of R Square Linear is perfectly ± 1 (Larson-Hall, 2010). The sign + and - is to show the type of correlation between both variables, where positive correlation is marked by the increase of one variable that is followed by the increase of another variable. Meanwhile, negative correlation allows an increasing one variable and a decreasing of another variable. Moving on to the result of this study, the value of R Square Linear for both measured variables is 0.16 which implies imperfect correlation of both variables. Thus, rather than saying there is no correlation between the two variables measured, the frequency of errors and scores, a weak correlation is

confirmed. Surprisingly, this result of this study is contradictory to a study conducted by Llach (2007) which showed a strong positive correlation between the lexical knowledge and the students' language proficiency. Considering the result of the prior study, it implies a need to look at other aspects or variables in this study which, then, it comes into a conclusion that the correlation of both variables is true to some extent. Further, it is assumed that other variable interferences, which are not examined in the current study, possibly take part in the result of the data analysis.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to investigate the metalinguistic competence of Indonesian students in applying the English tense-aspect system in their academic writing. The focus is to examine the grammatically well-formed sentences to further analyze whether the students have applied correct tenses and aspects in their writings. Adapting the error analysis procedure suggested by Corder (1981), this study involves sixteen submitted works of Indonesian students who were doing their master's program at Newcastle University. In short, it was found that the students' awareness toward the use of the English tense-aspect system in academic writing is considerably low. In line with this claim, the result of the data analysis found that, generally, there are four errors frequently made by the students, including overusing progressive aspect as well as simple past tense and misusing perfect aspect as well as future tense when another type of tense and aspect is required.

Subsequently, this study has made some contributions to the current body of literature. First, the ESL and EFL teachers could take some benefits from the result of this study as it provides some insight regarding some potential challenges that could be faced by the ESL or EFL students in applying the English tenses and aspects. Employing this insight, the education practitioners could design and prepare the learning materials to enable and help the students when they deal with those challenges. Also, it implies a need to raise the students' awareness of those challenges mentioned previously so that they are aware that constructing a grammatically well-formed sentence in their L2 production does not mean they have applied a proper language.

However, two main drawbacks in this study involve a limited distribution of the data and follow-up activity. Firstly, the data obtained is not equally distributed in terms of the word limits and the number of essays for each band score. To control the distribution of the errors, it is important to quantify the data equally. Meaning, the word limits and the number of writing in each band score category involved in the study should be equal. Meanwhile, some writings examined in this study have a different word limit and number of essays for each band score, which later it also affects the total number of errors found. Secondly, no follow-up activity is included in this study, such as interview and group discussion. This type of activity is considered essential to obtain the real intention of the students in applying a particular type of tenses and aspects in order to achieve an in-depth judgement of the analysis. Therefore, it is suggested for the future researchers to consider those limitations to be able to shed more light on the use of English tense-aspect system in academic writing by the second language learners. Additionally, an investigation on the same topic with a different context, location and/or culture of the participants is also encouraged to see the characteristic of the second language learners in this topic.

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