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The Frequency of The Twelve Verb Tenses in Academic Papers Written by Native Speakers

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THE FREQUENCY OF THE TWELVE VERB TENSES
IN ACADEMIC PAPERS WRITTEN
BY NATIVE SPEAKERS

by

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ABSTRACT

Because of the significant and sensitive role of verb tenses in learning English, the current study examined the occurrence of the twelve verb tenses that native writers (NWs) utilized in their selected academic papers at the college level. In doing so, the study created a baseline of relative frequency of verb tense usage that may benefit further studies, especially those connected with the teaching grammar to English learners. The main linguistic items targeted for tabulation in this study were the 12 verb tenses, modals, perfect modals, and imperatives. These items were elicited from an original corpus of 31 research papers written by undergraduate students studying at UCF. The total size of this original corpus is 103,181 words, with the length of papers varying from 1,964 words to 6,676 words. In order to analyze the data and facilitate a more accurate counting process, the researchers used a code coloring method.

The results revealed that the most frequently used tenses were present simple, past simple, modals, and present perfect, while future progressive, future perfect, and past and future perfect progressive were almost never used by NWs. These findings could contribute toward the development of the methodology of teaching verb tenses as well as help English learners to comprehend and master this important grammatical area. The pedagogical implication of these results is in improving the teaching of the verb tenses to English learners, as it accentuates the difference between which of the twelve verb tenses could be given more class time as well as those that could be given less attention.

I dedicate this humble work to my great father, Mr.

Abdulaziz, my sweet mom, Mrs. Fatima, my lovely siblings,

my kind host, Ms. Kathleen Rossin, here in the States, and

all of my friends who have been supporting me on this

journey.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Grammar is often seen as a key element for English language learners (ELLs) when they start their journey in learning English as a second language (ESL). To be certain, some parts of ESL grammar are more complex than others. If learners and teachers were asked to identify some of these more complex grammar points in English, mastery of the twelve verb tenses would certainly be among the top answers.

Statement of the Problem

Due to the myriad of grammar topics that might overwhelm both teachers and learners of English, it is quite difficult to identify the most important topics that should receive more attention. Teachers usually follow the curriculum of their textbooks or the curriculum of their of English institutions.

When it comes to grammar, some topics are more important than others because learners need more work with those specific topics. Mastery of the verb tense is one of these topics that needs extensive effort from ESL and EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers to convey sufficient knowledge to their students.

When ESL/EFL teachers receive the curriculum for each class, many assume that the previously designed or provided curriculum is the best way of teaching grammar. However, experienced teachers realize that some topics require more time and effort to achieve language mastery. For example, each of the twelve verb tenses in English varies in complexity, with some being potentially more complicated than others. In other words, some verb tenses need more

concentration and repetition than others compared to the curriculum of English schools might specify. For example, an ESL curriculum might allow one week to cover present perfect, which is utilized in a myriad of ways, and the same period of time to cover future tense with *will*, which is a simple form (will + verb).

In addition to difficulty of tense, it might make more sense to allocate more class time to a tense that occurs more frequently than others. For example, it is reasonable to assume that simple past tense is much more common than past perfect progressive tense, yet textbooks often allocate relatively similar page counts to both tenses. The question that can be asked then is, whether this is a fair distribution of time for these two tenses even though specialists and experienced teachers know the greater importance of the present perfect tense. English learners think that all twelve verb tenses are at the same level of importance and are used by native speakers, which is actually untrue. The ambiguity of which verb tenses need more time due to complexity, importance, or frequency is an important issue for both teachers and learners.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the current study, therefore, is to determine the verb tenses that native speakers use most frequently in college-level course assignments. Furthermore, the study will establish a baseline of relative frequency of verb tense usage in college writing assignments so that future research can refer to these findings for comparison or any other further investigation. The findings will assist material designers, textbook authors, and ESL teachers and students in recognizing the most important and common verb tenses. The researcher believes that the finding

will strongly help in the pedagogical process of learning English as a second language. As far as this researcher knows, no study has investigated the relative frequency of the twelve verb tenses, which is another reason for conducting this study.

<div align="center">Research Question</div>

What are the verb tenses that native speakers most frequently use in written language in college-level assignments?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Grammar

Grammar is an essential component for every language. It consists of a variety of subjects that guide and assist learners of a certain language to be familiar with the formula of sentences. Without grammar, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to produce an understandable language. Thornbury (1999, p. 1) defines grammar as the "description of the rules that govern how a language's sentences are formed." Another definition of grammar was suggested by Folse (2009, p. v), who defines grammar as the "set of patterns that holds a language together." Even with a great deal of vocabulary, lexical knowledge alone is not sufficient enough to produce meaningful language. For instance, *drunk Michael was* is an example that demonstrates that a chunk of words with a lack of grammar cannot lead to a clear meaning. Furthermore, adding or eliminating grammar components can lead to differences in sentence meaning. For example, an article can change the whole meaning of a sentence as *He was born on Monday* offers a completely different meaning from the sentence *He was born on a Monday*.

"Grammar has been at the heart of learning languages for centuries" (Folse, 2009, p. 1). Through grammar, second language learners commence their journey in learning the language. In English grammar books, a core component is the eight parts of speech. Books elaborately explain the eight parts of speech. Nouns refer to people, places, and things, such as *singer*, *house*, and *books*: Verbs describe actions or states of being, such as *drink* and *be*. Adjectives modify

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nouns or pronouns, such as *red* or *fast*. Adverbs describe actions, such as *slowly*. Pronouns

replace nouns, such as *he*, *them*, or *her*. Conjunctions connect two ideas together, such as *and*,

but, and *or*. Prepositions present the relationship between nouns and phrases, such as *at*, *in*, and

on. Interjections express feelings or reactions, such as *huh*, *wow*, and *gosh*. While some authors

would add the articles *a*, *an*, and *the* to the list of parts of speech (Yule, 2006), other linguists

consider them adjectives (Folse, 2009).

Tense vs. Aspect

There are certain grammar labels and terminology that ELLs find hard to understand.

Some of these labels make the grammatical rules sound more complicated than they should be.

One of these labels where ELLs might face difficulty is tense. According to Hinkel (1992, p.

557), "the meanings and forms of tenses are complex and often difficult for nonnative speakers

to acquire."

ELLs might ask the following questions: What is tense? Is it time? Are time and tense

related to each other? Cowan (2008, p. 350) points out that tense "expresses the time that an

action occurs in relation to the moment of speaking." In other words, tense is the element that

places an action or event in a specific moment. Marquez and Brown (1983) provids a clear

definition with "tense is a grammatical term referring to the form of the verb in relation to the

meaning of the sentence and/or the other parts of the sentence, like adverbs of time," whereas

"time refers to clock time in our physical world" (p. 68). Weinrich (1970) seconded the idea that

tense is independent of time and pointed out that this matter occurs in many languages. He bases

this conclusion on the result of many tense systems of various languages which do not easily apply the three divisions of past, present, and future. Hence, it can be said that tense is not the same as time but is related to it. The choice that speakers make in choosing the verb tense form shows their knowledge of the time's situation (Stranks, 2003).

On the other hand, aspect"concerns the different perspectives which a speaker can take and express with regard to the temporal course of some events, actions, process, etc." (Kelin, 1994, p. 16). In other words, it indicates how the speaker views the act. For further demonstration about the difference between tense and aspect, Table 1 offers an explanation:

Table 1: Tense vs. Aspect

Example	Tense	Aspect
Mike is swimming at the pool right now	Present	Progressive
Sami has eaten his lunch	Present	Perfect
Charlie was playing soccer last night	Past	Progressive
Sara had done her homework	Past	Perfect

From the examples in Table 1, it can be said that aspect and tense complement each other in conveying an accurate meaning of a certain event, action, or state of being. It is also helpful to know the difference between aspect and tense so that ESL/EFL teachers and students will be able to differentiate them.

<u>Why are Verb Tenses Hard?</u>

Verb Tense

Verb tense is one of the topics that every grammar book should have. It is one of the fundamental grammatical structures that needs to be acquired (or learned) at an early stage of learning a language in order to meaningfully communicate in that language. Verb tense "expresses the time that an action occurs in relation to the moment of speaking" (Cowan, 2008, p. 350). It tells whether the event or action is in the past, present, or future. Ali *played*; he is *playing*; and he will *play*. The previous statements show that the verb determines the time of the action. Therefore, verb tense can also be defined as the "verb structures that tell the time of the action expressed by the verb" (Folse, 2009, p. 48). The three "dimensions," as Cowan named them (2008), or the forms of the verbs (past, present, future), play a significant role in implying (i.e. indicating,) the meaning of the sentence, and in addition, they present one of the difficulties of learning English as a second language.

In English, there are twelve verb tenses: simple present, simple past, simple future, present progressive, past progressive, future progressive, present perfect, past perfect, future perfect, present perfect progressive, past perfect progressive, and future perfect progressive. Table 2 provides an example for each tense:

Verb Tense	Example
Simple present	She smiles.
Simple past	She smiled.
Simple future	She will smile.
Present progressive	She is smiling.
Past progressive	She was smiling.
Future progressive	She will be smiling.
Present perfect	She has smiled.
Past perfect	She had smiled.
Future perfect	She will have smiled.
Present perfect progressive	She has been smiling.
Past perfect progressive	She had been smiling.
Future perfect progressive	She will have been smiling.

Types of Obstacles that ELLs Encounter in mastering Verb Tenses

English language learners encounter a variety of difficulties in learning English and verb tense is one of the obstacles that has always been an issue for them. The difficulty becomes apparent with the presentation of the various forms of the verbs (Harris, 2010). Verbs can appear

in four forms: base form (*drink*), past (*drank*), past participle (*drunk*), present participle (*drinking*), as well as infinitive (*to drink*). That could be confusing for ELLs because they have to switch from one form to another depending on the grammatical context. For instance, the infinitive form comes after certain verbs, such as *afford, ask, decide, learn, intend, hope, plan, and refuse*, as in *Sami wants to drink water*; but with other verbs, such as *avoid, discuss, enjoy, get, practice, risk,* and *postpone,* the gerund form is required as in, *She enjoys drinking coffee with friends*. ELLs face confusion because sometimes there is no pattern that they can follow, as in these examples where English learners have to memorize which verbs are followed by gerunds and which by infinitives.

Another issue that ELLs might encounter is the use of a certain tense which indicates a specific time but expresses a different aspect. For example, it is widely known that native speakers of English sometimes utilize the present tense to express the future time (Folse, 2009). *The train arrives at the station in ten minutes* indicates the future while utilizing the present tense. Muhammad Rahman and Maksud (2015) discuses another difficulty namely, the various types of past tense and the differences between those forms. They cited examples of Bengali students who mixed the form of the past tenses, such as "*when I was come back home*" and *"I was done the work."* The past tense of regular verbs is quite clear when ELLs add *ed* to the verbs to become past, such as *prayed*, *called*, and *changed*. However, irregular verbs are an issue because students have to use many forms to transfer words into the past tense, such as internal vowel changes (e.g. run to ran) (Folse, 2009). Students find this difficult because there is no specific pattern that they can follow.

Sometimes the formula is not an issue for ELLs to comprehend but rather the different functions that each verb tense indicates because every verb tense has more than one usage. The simple present, for example, can be used for eight different functions: habitual actions or events in the present (*I take a shower every morning)*, general facts (*The sun rises from the east*), states (*It is sunny*), speech acts (*I choose Mark to be a captain*), the narration of a story (*The ghost opens the door and finds the little boy*), future events (*The flight takes off in about a half hour*), and the conditional clause (*if you agree to come with me, I will buy you a drink*) (Larsen-Freeman, Kuehn, & Haccius, 2002). This long list demonstrates one of the difficulties that ELLs experience during their study of the language, namely the fact that a given verb tense rarely has only one function.

Another suggested reason that explains the difficulty which ELLs might face is that English has its own structure. When ELLs start learning English, they keep comparing English to their mother tongue so much that they may reach a point where they get overwhelmed and frustrated because of the different system that English has. For example, there are many languages that have only one tense for future. English, however, has multiple tenses and ways to indicate the future tense (Larsen-Freeman, Kuehn, & Haccius, 2002).

The lexical aspect (Cowan, 2008) are also involved in such a situation. Verbs can be classified into various categories according to their form and function. The duration of an action, whether the action has an end, and if the action changes with time are factors that guided Cowan (2008) to develop with the lexical aspect. There are two types of lexical aspect: stative verbs, which are the type of verbs that express situations or states as in *Ali is at work*, and dynamic

verbs which, involve actions and activities as in *He is playing the piano*. The complication of the verbs and their forms and functions increases the difficulty of learning verb tenses. Cowan noted that ignorance of this lexical aspect is a part of the problem that causes difficulty for ELLs.

<u>What are the Most Difficult Verb Tenses?</u>

There is no doubt that verb tense is one of the grammatical concepts that ELLs struggle with. The variety of forms and the numerous rules that follow them make verb tense hard to comprehend. However, they vary in term of difficulty. There are many factors that play a crucial role in making the verb tenses either easy or difficult to comprehend. Discussing tense, aspect, and time in English modality DeCarrico (1986) stated that ELLs encounter difficulty in learning verb tense due to the insufficient explanations that grammar books offer. One of the difficult cases that she suggested is the hypothetical past. A sentence such as "*I would have joined you, but I was doing my homework*" is an example of one of the most difficult statements to comprehend due to its formula complexity and its hypothetical situation. She pointed out that due to the lack of clarification of time and tense and the relationship between them, ELLs struggle with these types of sentences.

DeCarrico (1986) has also provided another case where a grammar rule is not being well explained, which gives rise to a difficulty for English learners to master. The conditional past represents one of the obstacles for ELLs, and it needs much effort from English teachers to convey to the students the meaning of this type of tense. DeCarrico criticized one of the definitions that was suggested by Praninskas (1975), states that "past conditions are stated in the

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past perfect tense" and "the result clause includes *would, could, or might* are expressed in the present perfect tense" (p. 327). DeCarrico stated that these definitions are not only confusing for ELLs but misleading. However, according to Folse (2009), "present perfect tense is perhaps the most difficult of all tenses." (p. 113). He bases this on the fact that present perfect tense has more than four very different uses: first, past action that continuous now (*I have been here for 10 months*); second, something important happened in past and related to the present (Ali: *Do you need help with your assignment*. Mike: *Thanks, I have just finished it*): third, a past experience (*I have tried the Chinese restaurant down the street*); and fourth, the repetition of an action before now (*We have taken five exams so far*) (Folse, 2009). The other reason that might be behind the difficulty of the present perfect tense is that it expresses both present and past time. ELLs become confused because the label or the terminology for the tense is present, but it can be used for past actions or situations.

<u>Why is Frequency Important?</u>

Language teaching books need teachers and writers to continuously make judgments about language use, linguistic features, and words that should be included or excluded. Many ESL materials writers and textbooks authors adapt their work based on regular books (Biber & Reppen, 2002). In other words, the examples they provide in textbooks are inspired from natural texts to assure to students that the materials are "real". However, does this guarantee an optimal textbook? This leads to questions regarding what is appropriate to select for English learners and what is inappropriate? Do authors write these materials based on certified criteria? According to

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Dubin (1995), authors are "on their own," and they lack a well-developed knowledge about materials, which makes them rely on their own knowledge and impression in writing textbooks.

One of the suggested methods that can be used to assure effective and useful materials is frequency information. In the last 20 years, empirical analyses have offered a plethora of information about the patterns of language use (Biber & Reppen, 2002), which can be utilized for various purposes that serve the development of language teaching. Conrad, Biber, Reppen (1998) as well as Kennedy (1998) offer helpful instruction in how to use empirical analysis and how it could be beneficial for determining linguistic features.

However, Ellis (2002, p. 175-178) noted that frequency information has been neglected in applied linguistics for the past two decades. This neglect was due to the assumption that pedagogical practice is based on certified criteria and information frequency alone is not one of them (Biber & Reppen, 2002). According to Biber and Conrad (2001) and Biber and Reppen (2002), textbook authors tend to depend on their intuition and belief to determine the most common words, phrases, verb tenses, and many other component of language use. In fact, it has been proven that authors' intuition does not always provide accurate outcomes, and it often fails to reflect the actual language that is used by speakers and writers in real situations (Biber & Reppen, 2002).

Researchers began to believe in the crucial role of frequency after seeing its significance and its contribution to the field. The important role of frequency has become more popular since many studies have shown results that contradict researcher predisposed perceptions. An article by Biber and Reppen (2002) discussed many examples of corpus-based studies which led

textbook authors to make different decisions in material design. They examined more than one issue and presented interesting findings. They discussed grammatical features to include or exclude concentrating on noun premodifiers and words that should be included when giving examples in demonstrating a grammatical point, concentrating on verbs used in present progressive and simple present sentences. Utilizing empirical frequency methodology, they investigated the information of six ESL grammar books: *Basic Grammar in Use* (Murphy, Altman &Rutherford, 1989) for low intermediate; *Focus on Grammar* (Fuchs, Bonner, & Westheimer, 1999), *Fundamentals of English Grammar* (Azar, 1992), and *English Grammar in Use* (Murphy, 1986) for intermediate; and *Grammar Dimensions 3* (Thew- lis, 2000) and *Oxford Practice Grammar* (Eastwood, 1992) for intermediate to advanced.

The results revealed three unexpected findings: (1) In the six textbooks they surveyed, authors mostly focused on common adjectives (*a small apartment*) and participle adjectives (those that end with *ed* and *ing*)*. They did not give sufficient attention to the adjectival role of nouns (*e.g. computer science*) even though corpus-based investigation showed that noun modifiers are widely common in many registers. In fact, they are more frequent than those ending with *ed* or *ing*. This indicates that ELLs are definitely in need of instruction in this type of adjective since it is very widespread in terms of the use in different registers. (2) Vocabulary aspect is very important in grammar, and it could help to facilitate the assimilation process of grammatical features. Through the frequency information, Biber and Reppen (2002) discovered that textbooks use uncommon words, such as *kiss, rise, revolve, shine* and *smoke,* more than the common ones which occur the most in various registers (conversation, fiction, news, academic),

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such as *get, go, see, make, give, say,* and *thin*. It can be argued that including a long list of vocabulary helps ELLs to increase their vocabulary bank: however, the inclusion of the unfamiliar words might make the students' mission in understanding the grammar point much more complicated

That examination revealed such interesting findings that have tremendously assisted material designers in changing their beliefs about many language issues (Biber & Reppen, 2002). These results depict the crucial role that information frequency can play in developing materials for English learners and pedagogy in general. Frequency information or corpus linguistic studies might not be the only factor that could add a great deal of knowledge to the field and make a difference, but it is one of the components that helps to "provide a more solid basis than relying only on intuition and accepted practice" (Biber & Reppen, 2002, p. 201).

Examples from Previous Corpus Linguistic Studies

Corpus studies have provided us the instrument to determine the most common grammatical choices that writers and speakers make (Conrad, 2011). Gray and Biber (2011) defined corpus linguistics (CL) as the "methodology for linguistic analysis that focuses on describing linguistic variation in large collections of authentic texts (the corpus), using automatic and interactive computer programs to aid in analysis." In fact, without the assistance of computers (corpus-based studies), researchers would not be able to investigate many language issues. Conrad (2010) stated that CL gives researchers the opportunity to systematically study the variation in a myriad of texts. Therefore, the main purpose of corpus studies is to determine a

fixed pattern of a certain language component in different contexts (Gray & Biber, 2011). Corpus studies can also provide a description of the "function and frequency distribution of those linguistics features and patterns" (Harris, 2013).

Traditionally, "grammar is presented from a dichotomous perspective", so sentences are judged grammatical or ungrammatical, correct or incorrect, accurate or inaccurate (Conrad, 2010). The question that can be asked is, who is in charge of judging whether a sentence is grammatical or ungrammatical? Conrad pointed out that researchers are in need of native speakers' knowledge to base the grammatical rules on, which leads to a point where everyone can see the significant use of native speakers' language, either spoken or written, to determine a specific pattern of a grammar point that has not been discovered or discussed. Conrad also stated that through CL researchers can investigate the common and uncommon language choices and what is typical or untypical in specific contexts. This investigation offers a great deal of help in understanding the small details of a language, so it can be very useful for the pedagogical purposes.

As soon as the corpus linguistic studies became a tool for research, linguists and researchers found a way to examine many language issues that are difficult to be searched manually. One of the more interesting corpus linguistic studies determined the most common verbs in specific tenses. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999) claimed that grammar books discuss verb tenses only from a grammar perspective, such as adding *ed* to the verb in the simple past tense, however, verb tense was not been discussed and investigated from a lexical perspective. The study provided the most frequent verbs that occur in present tense and

past tense occurred in the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus (over 40 million words adopted from different registers). Table 3 depicts the verbs that occur 80 percent of the time in both present and past tense.

Table 3: Lexico-Grammatical Association of Verbs and Tenses (Biber et al, 1999)

Tense	Verbs occurring over 80 percent of the time in the tense
Present	*bet, doubt, know, matter, mean, mind, reckon, suppose, thank*
Past	*exclaim, eye, glance, grin, nod, pause, remark, reply, shrug, sigh, smile, whisper*

The study also suggested that some of these words are most likely to be found in short common expressions, such as "*I don't mind", "I suppose",* and "*It doesn't matter."* An example provided in a study by Biber *et al* (1999) discussed the omission of the optional *that* as in "*I think ( ) I'll go."* He found that the word *that* is usually omitted when the verb in the main clause is *say* or *think.* That shows the significant use of the CL and the convenience it offers because it would be extremely hard to investigate and accomplish proper outcomes like that.

Researchers have been actively using CL to investigate various language issues. Tarone, Dwyer, Gillette and Icke (1981), for example, examined the frequency of the passive and active voice and found that the active voice is frequently used more than the passive. A different study by Grander and Davies (2007) examined the aspects of the English phrasal verbs. Among its many findings, the study stated that 20 lexical verbs combined with particles represent over 518,000 phrasal verbs in English.

<p style="text-align:center;">Previous Corpus Linguistic Studies on Verb Tenses</p>

The literature offers some examples of CL studies that discuss the frequency of verb tenses. All of these studies were conducted on corpus linguistics methodology. Table 4 contains studies and correlated findings.

Table 4: Findings of Research for CL Studies on Verb Tenses

Study	Findings
Eli Hinkel, 2004	The study concentrates on the frequency use of the past, present, and future tenses, progressive and perfect aspects and the passive verbs in 115 academic essays written by native speakers and 631 essays by non-native speakers. Results: past-tense verbs were the most used by all speakers except Arabic.
Biber & Rebben, 2002	This study discussed the frequency of simple, perfect, and progressive aspects in different registers. It was done through a corpus of over 40 million words in four registers: conversation, fiction, academic, news. Results: simple aspect is the most common one in English conversation.
Tarone et al, 1981	This research investigated the frequency of active and passive verbs in two English for Science and Technology journal (EST) articles. Results: active voice outnumbered passive voice.

A Comparison of Verb Tense Usage between Native Speakers and ELLs

Hinkel (2004) conducted a corpus study using essays written by non-native speakers and comparing them to essays done by English speakers. The author aimed to investigate the essays and attempted to determine a pattern for the usages of the three tenses (past, present, and future), two aspects (progressive and perfect), and passive voice structures that occurred in academic texts of L1 and L2 speakers. Hinkle discussed the concern of many researchers who referred to

the lack of mastery of some grammatical features to the learning and acquisition process (Rutherford, 1984; Sharwood Smith, 1991). Therefore, comparing L1 speakers' texts to L2 speakers' texts could assist in having a better understanding of the reasons for this situation.

The study examined the essays of participants who speak one of the seven different languages different languages; English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Arabic. The total number of essays was 746. They were written for placement and diagnostic tests purposes in four different universities; 631 of those essays were written by non-native speakers. All of the students had been already accepted by the time they wrote the essays. A fixed time (50 minutes) was given to write essays.

Hinkel's results revealed that speakers of all languages, except Arabic, used past tense, with median rates of 2.98 to 5.08, far more than native speakers who frequently used the latter with rates of 1.81. Interestingly, Arabic speakers used fewer past-tense verbs. The usage of past tenses is primarily with narratives and the present tenses with formal academic prose Hunston (2002), which means that the topic plays a crucial role in the prevalence of each tense. The results also showed that trained L2 speakers avoided utilizing complex phrases such as passive voice, the perfect aspect, and the modal *would*.

Hinkel suggested that ELLs need to be taught more about the use of the tenses in certain contexts. Furthermore, she emphasizes that teachers must discuss the use of the passive voice and avoidance of stating personal experience in academic writing.

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Authors' Intuition is Not Always Right

The belief that progressive aspect is the most common aspect utilized by native speakers caused textbook authors to believe that progressive is the "unmarked choice," i.e., the most common one in conversation. This has led many authors to insert the progressive aspect in the first chapter of grammar textbooks, which ultimately encouraged ELLs to overuse this aspect. Based on *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al., 1999), Biber and Reppen (2002) conducted a study of the frequency of the aspects: simple, perfect, and progressive in four registers (conversation, fiction, news, and academic). The results showed that simple aspect is the unmarked choice and "simple-aspect verb phrases are more than 20 times as common as progressive in conversation." (p. 204). Therefore, introducing the progressive aspect early in a textbook might not be a prudent decision based on the evidence that has been provided by this study.
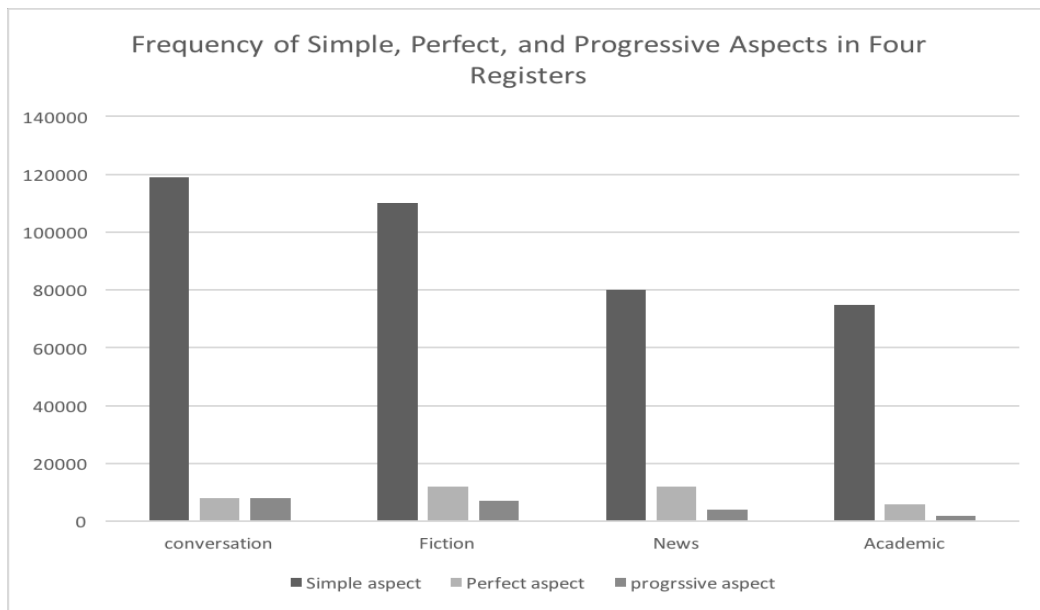
Figure 1: Frequency of Simple, Perfect, and Progressive Aspect in Four Registers (Biber et al., 1999)

Figure 1 shows the frequency of the three aspects in four registers. It is clear that simple aspect is the dominant aspect.

Frequency of Active and Passive Voice

Tarone et al. (1981) were inspired by studies that have examined verb tense and aspect using corpora data. In this study, the researchers sought to investigate the frequency of active and passive verbs that occurred in English for Science and Technology (EST) articles. They noted that passive voice is widely common in scientific texts. Robinett (1980) proposed a study that analyzed various scientific texts and found that 46% of verb phrases that contain *be* were passive voice. Tarone et al. (1981) believed that different findings would appear if they conducted their study on one singular scientific field. They decided to take two journal papers in the field of astrophysics and counted all the passive with the following formula: *subject + be + verb + en*.

The findings showed that, in both papers, active verb forms are far more frequent than the passive verb forms. The results allowed the authors to make some generalizations: the authors of journals use passive form whenever they propose future work, when they refer to other research that contrast their work, and when they cite other works that second their point of view.

The literature review has explained verb tenses in English grammar and why ELLs find them difficult. It has also shed light on the studies and their significant role in investigating language issues. The chapter has proposed some studies that have utilized CL and shown its benefit in determining grammatical features. It has also offered various correlated studies

regarding the frequency of verb tenses. The former studies have deeply investigated verb tenses from different perspectives and have added a great deal of knowledge to applied linguistic, and pedagogical fields. However, as far as this researcher knows, there is no study that has examined the relative frequency of the twelve verb tenses, and this researcher seeks to accomplish that goal.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

There is certainty about the prevalence of specific verb tenses. Some of the verb tenses are definitely more important and common than others. However, do ELLs have to learn all the twelve verb tenses? Are they in need to master and use them daily? ELLs can argue that future perfect, for example, is not that common and they don't encounter it that much! They would definitely start wondering why they need to learn it! This issue being: do ESL/EFL teachers have an answer for these concerns? A simple way of answering these questions is to conduct a corpus study and determine what types of tenses native speakers use the most. This study is concentrating on written language and committed to finding an answer to the following research question:

> What are the verb tenses that native speakers most frequently use in written language in college-level assignments?

Design of the Study

A corpus of over 100,000 words was assembled from research papers written by native speakers. All papers were carefully analyzed for verb tenses, modals and perfect modals. In order to check the occurrence of the targets, every category was specified with a particular color code. Microsoft Excel was used to finalize the tallier numbers and determine the frequency of the targets.

Pilot Study

In order to verify the accuracy of eliciting the targets from students' writings, the researcher implemented a pilot study. The researcher and two other participants, who both hold a Master's degree in TESOL from UCF, carefully examined the students' writings. These papers were provided from an instructor of general composition courses in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. It came to the researcher's attention that papers which contained controversial topics were likely to have a variety of tense usage, which was preferable rather than examining papers that were limited to specific tenses, which would clearly assist in the reliability of the study. Therefore, the instructor provided random research papers ranging from eight to fifteen pages long. The examiners worked individually with one objective, which was to color code the targets (verb tenses, modals, perfect modals, imperatives) on every page of the papers.

The examiners, including the researcher, agreed to meet to discuss the findings. They compared their findings and came close having 9,401 verb tenses, 1,045 modals, 32 perfect modals, and 22 imperatives elicited from 103,181 words with a very high rate of reliability. Meaning that the results of the pilot study verified the process and the data analysis done by the examiners.

The Corpus for this Study

The whole data was gathered from the Department of Writings and Rhetoric for the purpose of creating a corpus. The researcher was inspired from a study done by Hinkel (2004), which partly aimed to determine the median frequency rates of the past, present, and the future

tenses used by native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS). Her results showed a significant difference of tense usage between NS and NNS.

The professor from the Department of Writing and Rhetoric provided research papers written by native speakers. All of papers were written by undergraduate students attending UCF. The researcher randomly selected 31 papers and assured that they were long enough to satisfy the researcher's objective in terms of word count.

Since the researcher was interested in the main content of the papers, there were some parts that were removed. For the sake of privacy, personal information including names and dates were removed. The appendixes were also taken out because not all the papers contained one; furthermore, some of them included spoken language (interviews), which did not meet the researcher's interest (of written language only). Therefore, the researcher aimed to categorize the papers by examining only the main content. After completing these steps, the researcher utilized Microsoft Office to count the total amount of words for each of the 40 papers. Each paper was coded from 001 to 039.

After all these procedures, the researcher was able to recognize the length of each paper in terms of word count. Paper lengths ranged between 2,206 and 4,067 words. The length of papers supports that students differ when it comes to writing abilities and ways of conveying their thoughts and ideas. Some would just follow the criteria that was provided by the professor and state facts, but others would elaborate using excessive examples and more ideas. Ultimately, the total amount of words of the current corpus is 103,181 words.

<u>Analysis</u>

After compiling the data and removing the unnecessary parts, the papers were ready to be analyzed. The examiners started reading and analyzing the papers individually. Since there are various targets that need to be elicited, the researcher suggested a color coding method to facilitate the process of data collection. Therefore, every target was assigned to a specific color code, and all examiners agreed to the fixed classification. As it appeared in Figure 2, the examiners followed this coding color: present simple/*yellow*, past simple/ *red*, present perfect/*light green*, past progressive/*white*, simple future/*gray*, modals/*purple*, perfect modals/ *lavender* and the rest of verb tenses were counted manually due to their unpopularity (they were put in bold).

The question of man's morality – good or evil ==was discussed== by a group that ==sees== some men as good and others as evil. VanBuren ==believes== no man ==is== truly evil including Hitler. In contrast, Hathaway ==saw== genocide as evidence of some evil. Since one of my questions ==was== too specific about whether slasher films ==affect== our view of men, four of four ==said== no. When ==asked== how their view ==has changed== of man with respect to the influence of all horror films, then the group no longer ==denied== any change of view. Fitzgerald ==described== her view ==widened== to include twisted people; VanBuren ==commented== how horror ==opened== his once naïve eyes. Despite a belief of some evil men, the focus group ==didn't show== much concern for their safety at Halloween Horror Nights where according to Fitzgerald freaks ==can go== to scare children. Fitzgerald an employee at Universal Studios of Orlando ==places== her security in the hands of the numerous security guards. Thus, some men ==are== good and some ==are== evil, but that ==doesn't prevent== us from living our lives.

Figure 2: Examples of the Code Coloring

Once the entire analysis of each paper was perfectly done, the data were transferred to an Excel document file and put into categories. Each target was placed in a row followed by columns that represented the pages of the paper. The order of the targets was fixed and unified to all Excel files. This process was done separately for each paper.

During the counting process, the examiners encountered different issues about some contexts and agreed to implement the following. First, if the sentence was an active or passive voice, it was treated equally and marked depending on the main targets whether it is one of the twelve verb tenses, modals, or perfect modals. Secondly, affirmative, negative and question form sentences were treated the same. Finally, imperative sentences, such as "*remove them from your diet completely*" were put into a separate category because they are not correlated to any of the twelve verb tenses and have no tense.

After inserting all frequency counts in Excel, the values were automatically tabulated through Excel. The researcher had all the numbers for each target from each paper and did the same steps for all papers (see Figure 3 for an example). After all these steps, the frequency of the targets was determined by adding all the numbers together. These procedures were used to determine the most frequent verb tenses that native speakers use in academic written language.

	A	B	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	TOTALS
1	KEY		P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	TOTALS
2	A	Simple Present	18	9	2	3	7	19	13	24	14	3	112
3	B	Simple Past	0	17	24	23	20	17	26	15	17	0	159
4	C	Present Perfect	4	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	8
5	D	Present Progressive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	4
6	E	Past Progressive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	F	Simple Future	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	G	Future Progressive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	H	Past Perfect	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
10	I	Future Perfect	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	J	Present Perfect Progressive	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
12	K	Past Perfect Progressive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13	L	Future Perfect Progressive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
14	M	Modals	0	3	5	0	6	3	6	0	5	0	28
15	P.M	Perfect Modal	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
16													315

Figure 3: Example of the Counting Process in Excel

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

Intuition probably is not the best way to determine language features because it is not accurate, most of the time, especially when it comes to the relative frequency of verb tenses. Authors have written grammar textbooks in a certain design which may not appreciate the actual complexity of the twelve verb tenses. As stated above, there are various components that play a crucial role in teaching the twelve verb tenses. First of all, the order of the twelve verb tenses and which tense should be taught first is important. Secondly, the popularity of these verb tenses is also considered very significant for many reasons and making ELLs sound more native is one of the reasons, and last but not least, the difficulty of verb tenses should also be taken into consideration when teaching verb tenses. Therefore, the current study offered an investigation for the twelve verb tenses and aimed to answer this question:

What are the verb tenses that native speakers most frequently use in written language in college-level assignments?

Results

In order to answer the previous question, the researcher created a corpus study for assignments written by native speakers. Different targets were assigned in this research to be counted: the twelve verb tenses, modals, perfect modals, and imperatives. The size of corpus was 103,181 words.

The entire analysis of the twelve verb tenses is exhibited in table 5. The number of occurrences and percentage of the twelve verb tenses are organized according to the most used by native speakers in academic written assignments.

Table 5: The Table Provides the Number of Occurrences and Percentages of the Twelve Verb Tense Elicited from Over 100,000-Word Corpus

Verb tense	Times of Occurrence	Percentage
1. Present Simple	5244	49.99%
2. Past Simple	2990	28.50%
3. Present Perfect	488	4.65%
4. Future Simple	244	2.32%
5. Present Progressive	243	2.31%
6. Past Perfect	77	0.73%
7. Past Progressive	75	0.71%
8. Present Perfect Progressive	23	0.21%
9. Future Progressive	3	0.02%
10. Future Perfect	2	0.01%
11. Past Perfect Progressive	1	0.009%
12. Future Perfect Progressive	1	0.009%

Of these fifteen targeted linguistic forms, the present simple tense was the dominant tense and represented the highest percentage, 49.99%, (half of the verbs in the entire corpus). The results, especially for the simple present, were not that surprising because previous studies revealed that the simple aspect is usually the most common type not only in spoken English but also written (Biber *et al.*, 1999).

The reason behind this prevalence could be of the multiple usages that simple present tense has. According to Folse (2009), simple present has several usages. The following excerpts were taken from data-paper 002 demonstrate different present tense usages.

Excerpt A	A fact that is currently true

The Common Core State Standards *are* a set of nationwide standards *put* in place in grades k-12 that *help* students achieve real world knowledge.

Excerpt B	A recurrent event

They *don't think* about the quizzes or the tests at the end of the year.

Excerpt C	A sentence that states a condition

We *start* to feel more comfortable with it.

The second most frequent verb tense as depicted in the data was simple past. It occurred 2,990 times, which represented 28.5% of the verbs of the entire corpus, reflecting various usages.

However, the most common usage was for sentences that state a completed action. An example provided from data-paper 023.

Excerpt D	A sentence that states a completed action

In order to gather information, I *created* a survey in which I *asked* my peers to read and analyze two passages from two books, one that *portrayed* a nontraditional male gender role and one that *portrayed* a more traditional female gender role.

The third verb tense of simple aspect was not as much common as the other tenses. The simple future tense appeared 244 times and that represented 2.37% of the entire data, which could be considered a huge number when compared to other verb tenses. The majority of the simple future sentences came with *will + verb* and the following excerpt from data-paper 024 shows the point:

Excerpt E	A future plan

I *will provide* information about the environment at Crealde and the motivations the artist there have. I *will also attempt* to answer my main research question.

The following chart (Figure 4) depicts the percentage of the occurrence of three verb tenses within the simple aspect, representing a large differential between each.
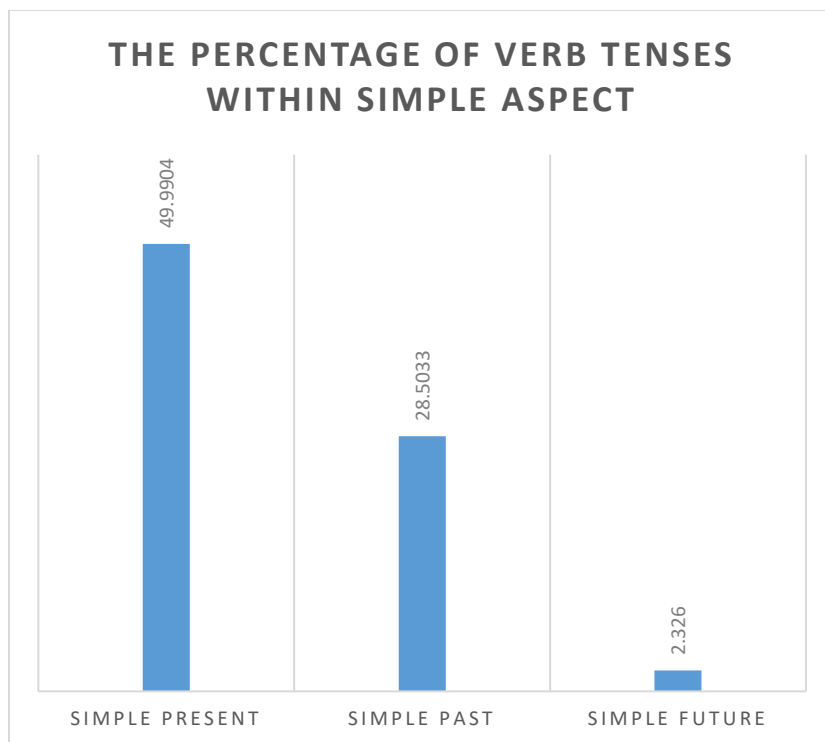
THE PERCENTAGE OF VERB TENSES WITHIN SIMPLE ASPECT

- SIMPLE PRESENT: 49.9904
- SIMPLE PAST: 28.5033
- SIMPLE FUTURE: 2.326

Figure 4: Percentage of Simple Aspect

Results revealed that the progressive aspect is not widely common in academic assignments. Among the three tenses of progressive aspect, the present progressive tense represented the highest percentage, 2.31% (occurred 243 times), becoming the fifth most common verb tense used by NSs in written academic language. It appeared with different usages and the following example from data-paper 007 represents one of them:

Excerpt F	An action that is happening now

This *is causing* students, for example, to lose out on a lot of information when they skim articles.

The past progressive came as the seventh most common verb tense among the whole list and occurred 75 times within the 31-paper simple randomly chosen. Results also showed that the future progressive was barely used by NSs, occurring only three times. Figure 5 shows the percentage of each verb tense in the progressive aspect.
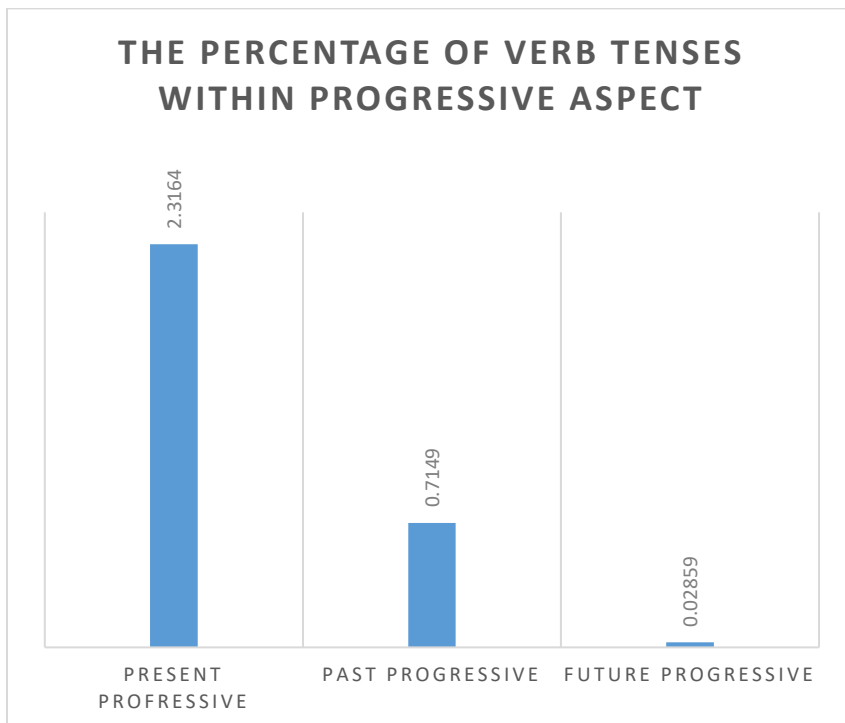
THE PERCENTAGE OF VERB TENSES WITHIN PROGRESSIVE ASPECT

PRESENT PROFRESSIVE	2.3164
PAST PROGRESSIVE	0.7149
FUTURE PROGRESSIVE	0.02859

Figure 5: The Percentage of Progressive Aspect

When it comes to the perfect aspect, the results revealed interesting findings. The present perfect tense came out as the third most common verb tense overall. It was located 488 times, which represented 4.65%. NSs utilized various usages of present perfect; however, the most common use was represented in the following excerpt, which is for an action that happened in the past at unspecific time.

Excerpt G	An action that happened in the past at an unspecified time.

Many researchers *have discussed* and *analyzed* the slump of baseball and the growth of football. They *have looked* at the numbers and the history of the numbers, and *analyzed* each sport individually.

Interestingly, the past perfect occurred almost as many times as the past progressive tense (75 times). It was found 77 times, which represented 0.734%. The third tense of perfect aspect is future perfect tense which was recorded only twice.
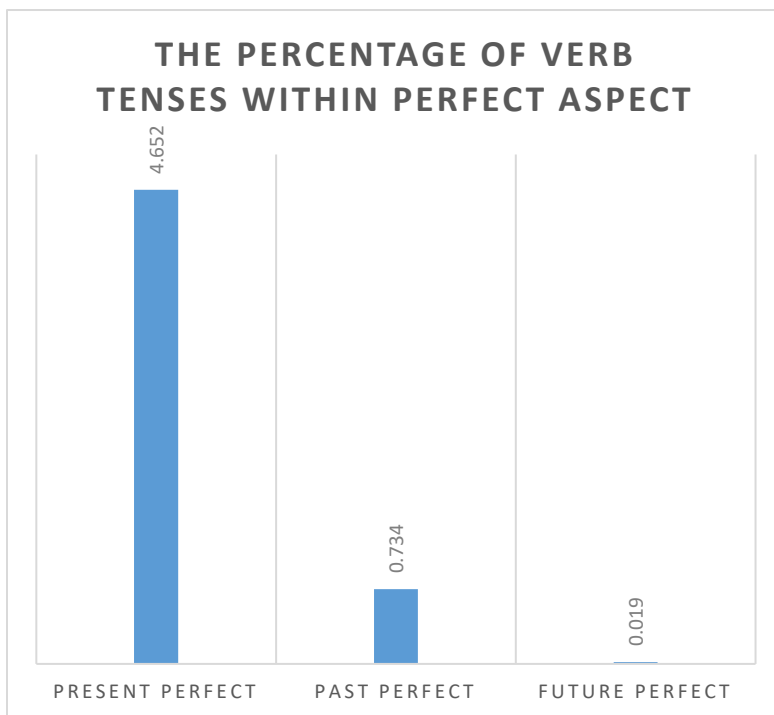

Figure 6: The Percentage of Perfect Aspect

The fourth and last aspect seen in Figure 7 shows the present perfect progressive, which was hardly ever used by NSs. The present perfect progressive tense was located 23 times and

represented the highest percentage, 0.219%, within this aspect. The other two verb tenses of the

aspect, past perfect progressive and future perfect progressive, were used one time each and were

found in two different papers. Figure 7 shows the distribution of the verb tenses within perfect
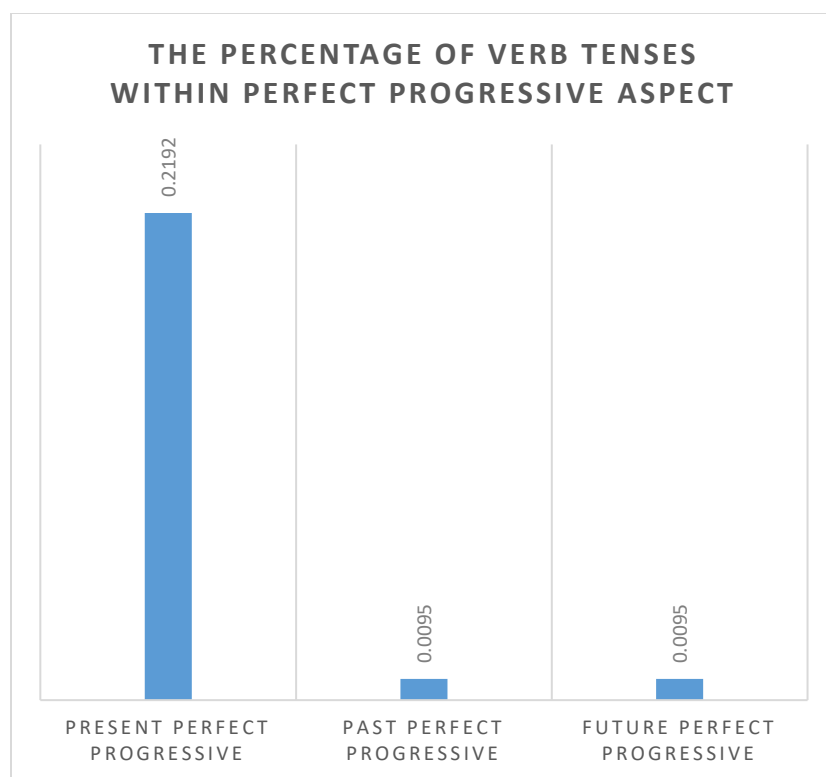
progressive aspect.

Figure 7: The Percentage of Perfect Progressive Aspect

The researcher included other targets to be counted for the purpose of supporting the

corpus study and comparing their frequency with the twelve verb tenses. The results found in

Table 6 demonstrate the preference of NSs to favor the use of modals in different contexts.

Table 6: The Percentage of Modals, Perfect Modals, and Imperatives

	Times of occurrence	Percentage
Modals	1045	9.9%
Perfect Modals	32	0.3%
Imperative	22	0.2%

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The study employed to determine the most frequent verb tenses that native speakers use in written language. The researcher implemented the study to contribute to the development of ESL grammar teaching. In order to complete the study, 31 papers written by native speakers attending UCF as undergraduate students were collected to answer the following research question:

What are the verb tenses that native speakers most frequently use in written language in college-level assignments?

Limitations

As with any research, the current study had certain limitations. This research could have been bolstered by a more stringent system of interrater reliability in identifying and labeling the verb tenses used in the papers.

The corpus size contained only 103,181 words, so any conclusions are constrained by the size of this sample, no matter how representative it may or may not be of all academic writing. In addition, this study examined only 31 papers, again limiting our ability to generalize about the language that might have been found in a higher number of papers.

For the purposes of the current study, the papers were provided by one instructor teaching several sections of freshman composition, and the researcher was not able to select the genres of the writing. Therefore, an important limitation of this study is that the writing that was provided

appears to be mostly expository writing, meaning that any generalizations may apply only to expository writing. However, the current study is a solid contribution toward a basic pedagogical question that has remained relatively unresearched until now, namely, what are the verb tenses that are most frequently used in college writing tasks?

Implications

For Teachers

The findings of the current study could help teachers to enhance the methodology of teaching verb tenses. ESL teachers sometimes face difficulty in finding the best way of teaching verb tenses due to the variety of forms and usages. However, these findings could offer ESL teachers shortcuts and give them a clearer vision of English verb tenses. First of all, the frequent use of present simple, past simple, modals, and present perfect shows their importance in written English. Therefore, it would make more sense for ESL teachers dedicated more time and effort on these are that are more frequent rather than spending time on verb tenses that are barely used. The results showed that, out of over 100,000 words of academic writings, future perfect was used only twice. That means it is not as important as the tense that occurred over 5,000 times. It does not mean that ESL teachers are not supposed to teach future perfect, but they should not assign a disproportionate amount of time on it.

Secondly, ESL teachers can now have an answer for questions about verb tense frequency. English learners might ask the teacher about the significance of certain verb tenses

and whether they are used frequently. ESL teachers will be able to provide more accurate information about the frequency of each verb tense usage and which verb tenses ELLs should concentrate on. ESL teachers now have corpus data that could impact the classroom for each verb tense based on their importance and frequency.

For Materials Writers

Since textbooks are a significant component and play an important role in the teaching and learning processes, grammar textbook authors should pay attention to these findings. The results point to the importance of some verb tenses over others and shows the significant differences between the twelve verb tenses. Moreover, it provides the perspective of native speaker use of verb tenses to convey their thoughts and ideas.

However, most of the grammar textbooks introduce the twelve verb tenses in a certain curriculum according to the tradition of previous grammar books. In fact, these curricula do not reflect the percentages this study has revealed. From a practical point of view, it is time to reinitiate the methodology of introducing the verb tenses based on real world data. For example, it would be much more helpful for ELLs to know that present perfect is much more frequent (488 instances) than future perfect, while is almost never used by native speakers (only twice instances). English learners would appreciate these types of facts, so that they can wisely distribute their concentration and efforts to the tenses that are more common. Therefore, textbooks should at least have some explanations about the frequency of each verb tense and whether it is commonly used or not. That would facilitate the teaching process in that ESL

teachers could use drills and exercises in classrooms for the twelve verb tenses based on authentic frequency usage.

For Students

English learners could benefit considerably from these findings. Unfortunately, ELLs feel frustrated by the fact that they have to learn the twelve verb tenses with the various forms and numerous usages. Moreover, the lack of knowledge causes ELLs to believe that it is necessary to use the twelve verb tenses all the time. However, these findings indicate that they do not have to utilize all the twelve verb tenses when they write. According to the findings, they will mostly use present simple (49%), past simple (28%), modals (9%), and present perfect (5%) meaning that they should consider dedicating most of their efforts on tenses that are used daily by native writers and not pay as much attention to the rarer tenses. Verb tenses, such as future perfect, future perfect progressive, and past perfect progressive, are almost never used by native speakers, which implies that ELLs should not have to spend so much time studying them.

<u>Suggestions for Future Studies</u>

The current study has shown that present simple, past simple, modals and present perfect occur the most frequently in academic papers written by native speakers. It has also shown that there are tenses that are barely used by native speakers. Therefore, these findings could be a baseline from where further investigations and studies could continue. Future studies, for example, could compare the frequency of verb tenses used by ELLs to those by NWs. That

would help determine the ability of ELLs in writing and, whether or not, ELLs reach a native-like level.

Future research could also utilize the findings to investigate pedagogical issues. Material writers should consider extensive changes and improvements in introducing verb tenses to ELLs. For example, they could discuss the positive extent of neglecting or avoiding teaching verb tenses that are not commonly used by native speakers.

Conclusion

This study sought to answer the following research question:

What are the verb tenses that native speakers most frequently use in written language in college-level assignments?

The findings revealed that native writers utilized the present simple (49.99%), which represented the highest percentage in a 103,181-words corpus, followed by past simple (28.50%), modals (9.9%), present perfect (4.65%), future simple (2.32%), and present progressive (2.31%). The rest of the verb tenses, perfect modals, and imperatives were less than zero percent. The study, therefore, raises a question about the pedagogy of introducing verb tenses to ELLs and the sufficient attention that should be given for each of the twelve verb tenses.

APPENDIX: DATA ANALYSIS

Data Analysis Page Sample:

Rivera was also selected to view part of the conversation out of print media as television reaches different audiences. Limitations for this research consisted of time constraints and media source overload. While difficulty exists in trying to gain a representative picture of the media, I attempted to gather sources both on a local and national level that have a significant presence in the public.

RESULTS

Recent discourse on marijuana legalization has sparked conversation on the ideas of enabling young adults. David Brooks recently published a piece in *The New York Times* which he denounced marijuana legalization. Brooks asserts his own narrative of marijuana usage and how, over time, he and most of his friends eventually moved on to other things. Feeling it would encourage others to continue their drug use rather than outgrow it as he had in his youth, Brooks attempts to focus on the moral implications rather than the economic effects like other anti-legalization arguments.

Over the course of the trial's presence in the public eye, numerous media outlets have contributed in unique ways. Articles selected from the *Miami Herald* include information reported before and during the criminal trial on the personal life of Martin. The back and forth nature of the courts on the decision to allow personal life details such as texts and social media posts is noted several times. Whether or not the courts will allow the jury to hear the details is irrelevant as news media publishes the information anyway for the public to consume.

Conservative leaning *Fox News* is another example of reporting during the trial. Journalist

Geraldo Rivera encourages Black and Latino parents "to not let their children go out in hoodies"

(Geraldo). Other national media sources like the *Huffington Post* have added to the conversation

with the inclusion of Martin's autopsy report and the levels of marijuana present in his system

that may have affected his behavior that night. In the same story, the media reports quotes from

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