

Tense Choice And Academic Citation In The Literature Review Section Of Research Papers: Evidence From A Nigerian University

Sunday Ibibi Patrick

Veritas University, Abuja

Edadi Ilem Ukam

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Gabriel B. Egbe

Veritas University, Abuja

Abstract

Tense choice is one notable feature of academic writing in some sections of the research paper. This study investigates tense choice in the undergraduate projects of Veritas University, Abuja drawn from the Faculty of Humanities (FH), and the Faculty of Natural and Applied Sciences (FNAS). Ten undergraduate projects were randomly selected from four departments in the two faculties. Comrie's (1985) theory of tense was used to analyse the data from the literature review section (LRS) with an approximate number of 23,877 words of the research projects. The results show that the simple present (53.13%) and simple past (25.99%) occurred more frequently in the LRS of undergraduate research projects in the samples analysed, while the present perfect (8.82%), modal (7.42%), past perfect (2.09%), simple future (1.39%) and present continuous (1.16%) occurred less frequently in that order. The performance suggests that even though any verb tense could be used in the LRS, Veritas University undergraduates used more simple present and simple past forms of verbs in academic citation. The paper concludes that simple and past tense of verbs are used frequently in the LRS among Nigerian undergraduate students. This agrees with the fact that where a more general claim is being made about the information presented in the form of supporting facts, the present tense is selected whereas where no claim to a generality for the facts is given in support of a core idea, the information is presented in the past tense.

Keywords: Tense choice; Academic citation; Nigerian undergraduates; Literature review; Research articles

1.1 Introduction

Written academic English has been identified as one of the major areas of learners' need of a language, and whatever knowledge one has cannot be fully expressed without the benefit of written competence. Knowledge of

appropriate use of tenses, especially for academic writing for English language learners is a necessity. Second language learners need to know the appropriate use of tenses meant for literature review section (LRS) in academic

writing. Tense choice is, therefore, considered a primary concern when writing and, especially when citing sources in academic research papers (Hyland, 1999).

Appropriate academic citation is a measure of membership of an academic community. Using an appropriate tense in citations becomes a requirement for successful academic discourse given that tense choice is both discipline-specific and content-constrained in academic discourse. Academic writings, written by both graduate and undergraduate students, are expected to convey disciplinary content by choosing verb forms to convey intended meaning and reduce obscurity. As Lynch (2014, p. 22) points out, using a variety of reporting verbs will help to make academic writing more interesting for the readers. Although there are as many as 400 reporting verbs in English (Hyland 1999, p. 349), in practice, a much smaller number of verbs tend to predominate.

Important as tense choice is in academic writing, English language learners seem to encounter problems in making the appropriate choices. For instance, most Nigerian undergraduate students may be unsure of the right verb tense to use in report literature review or may simply be uncertain about whether the literature review section (LRS) should be written in present tense, past tense, or any of the other tenses. As such, handling tense choices in the LRS among Nigerian undergraduate students is a general problem (Egbe, 2014).

Some previous studies (Lamidi, 2010; Wang & Tu, 2014; Ozturt, 2019; Sabra, 2020) have analyzed tense choices of learners of English as second language. Some of these

studies focus on academic writing generally. This particular study focuses on the literature review section of academic research articles because this is the section where writers and researchers show close membership of the academic research community in terms of how they negotiate claims of previous studies and findings, how some findings are reported, and how they are able to create a niche for their own research through appropriateness of tense choice to frame their ideas, negotiate claims, accept and /or refute the position of previous literature.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to analyse the tense choices in the academic citations of Nigerian undergraduates using samples from a Nigerian University.

- i. To identify the various tense choices used by Nigerian undergraduates and their distribution in the LRS section of students' graduating research papers.
- ii. To analysis if certain tense choices create miscues and misunderstandings of the intended discourse in the academic research papers of Nigerian undergraduates.
- iii. To describe the effects of miscue of appropriate tenses in the academic citations of undergraduate students of Veritas University, Abuja.

2.1 Conceptual classification

2.1.1 Tense, time, aspect and the English tense

Tense, time and aspect often pose difficulty to second language learners who find it difficult to differentiate them. Tense generally helps us to understand the concept between the form of a verb and our concept of time (see Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973, p. 52). A

language is said to have tenses when it has a grammatical category to express time reference (Comrie, 1976, p. 6). Tense systems are language-specific, and often encode other sorts of information such as aspect and mood. Because of this, the analysis of tense can be complicated, especially when stylistic and pragmatic factors are taken into consideration (Bussmann, Trauth, Kazzazi & Bussmann 1996, p. 1183). Time is a universal, non-linguistic concept with three divisions: past, present, and future. For Alzuhairy (2016, p. 5), tense “expresses the time that an action occurs in relation to the moment of speaking” (p. 350). In other words, 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. Alzuhairy also argues that tense is independent of time following how tense is deployed in many languages which do not easily apply the three divisions of past, present and future. While it can be said that tense relates with time, tense is not the same as time.

Aspect on the other hand, defines the different perspectives which a speaker can take regarding the temporal course of some events, actions and processes. The difference between tense and aspect is illustrated below. Aspect is underlined while **tense** is in boldface.

Table 1: Illustrating the differences between tense and aspect

Example	Tense	Aspect
Chigozie is <u>drinking</u> right now.	Present	Progressive
Igbabec has eaten his dinner.	Present	Perfect
Kenny was playing soccer yesterday.	Past	Progressive
Omale had done her homework.	Past	Perfect

From the illustrations above, it is evident that while it may be difficult to differentiate aspect from tense, both features are necessary and complementary in conveying accurate meaning of certain events, actions or states of being. And these are important features when writing academic research papers.

The English tense system, which gives information about time, is complicated. Most often, second language students might confuse tense with time, considering the two as synonymous. But Çakır (2011, p. 124)

considers tense to refer to a verb form, not to chronological time. In English, tense and time are not synonymous. Despite the fact that there is no universal application to how many tenses every language must have, it should be noted that not all the linguists agree with the idea of English as a three-tense language. “It is sometimes claimed, in fact, that in English it is possible to distinguish only between present and past, the future being a modal form of the present” (Fum, Pani, & Tasso, 1991, p. 151). On the other hand, some linguists state that there are three tenses in English: present, past and future, equating it with the three basic

divisions of time (Çakır, 2011, p.124). The argument against this submission will be the difficulty of severing the concept of chronological time, which is a universal, non-linguistic concept with the three divisions of past, present and future. Whether there are two or three tense verbs in English, "the meanings and forms of tenses are complex and often difficult for non-native speakers to acquire" (Hinkel, 1992, p. 557).

On functionality, Malcolm (1987) and Egbe (2014) have noted that tense choices are based on the notion of the degree of generality the author wishes to invest, pointing out that tenses may be ranked in terms of degrees of generality, as demonstrated below.

- i. Where no claim to generality for the facts is given in support of a core idea, the information will be presented in the past tense.
- ii. Where the information is being presented as a good generalisation about past events, but no commitment is being made about future events, the present perfect tense is selected.
- iii. Where an even more general claim is being made about the information presented in the form of supporting facts, the present tense is selected.

However, these generalisations do not take into account discipline-specific discourses or particular sections of the academic research article where a particular form of verb tense may be used more frequently.

2.2 Some previous studies

Lamidi (2010) investigated tense and aspect in English and Yoruba, using contrastive theory as the model for the analysis in order to

know whether Yoruba learners can use the features correctly. According to the source, despite many years of learning from primary, secondary and tertiary, Yoruba learners of English often use inappropriate tenses and aspects of English verbs. The study also notes that learners are sometimes unsure whether to use present tense or past tense in citing scholarly work. Specifically, the study notes that (i) Yoruba-English learners have problems with using the present form of a verb to realise future meaning; (ii) they have problem in the sequences of tenses in English; (iii) inconsistency is manifested in the application of rule of tense sequence among Yoruba learners of English; and (iv) learners generalise irregular verbs as they are confused with the right verbs to use to mark the past from the present. This study is relevant because some of the projects used for the current study are written by students who are Yoruba-English speakers.

Ozturt (2019) studied verb tense usage in research article introductions in applied linguistics. The corpus consisted of over 50 research article introductions published between 2014 and 2015 issues of five journals. The researcher selected randomly 10 research articles from each, consisting 50,736 words in total. The findings show that the simple present tense is the most preferred tense in research introduction with 47.10 %, followed by simple past (28.2%), present perfect (13.4%) and finally modal verbs (10.4%).

Wang and Tu (2014) worked on tense use and move analysis in journal article abstracts. They collected 1,000 journals article abstracts from four journals related to applied linguistics. The findings reveal that only 17.3 per cent of the journal abstracts are written in

accordance with Create a Research Space models, and the frequency of the present tense is significantly high in *Journal of Pragmatics* abstracts with 70 per cent, but low in *Journal of Research in Reading* (34.1%) and *Reading and Writing* abstracts (26.6%). The frequency is moderate in *Journal of Second Language Writing* abstract (48.6%). The author further stated that the frequency of the use of the past tense in *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Journal of Second Language Writing* abstracts are relatively lower (13.1%) and low (37.5%), respectively. It is moderate in *Journal of Research in Reading* abstract (56.6%), but high in *Reading and Writing* with 65.5 per cent. The study concluded that there is a greater tendency to use present tense in writing some journal abstracts, but not in others. And that both past and present tenses are points of emphasis in writing journal abstracts, although the present tense has a higher frequency in writing journal abstracts than the past tense.

From the works reviewed, it is evident that the choice of verb tense in academic writing is an important consideration in academic writing. The works reviewed analysed tense choice in research abstract and introduction sections of the academic research paper. The current study focuses on the LRS where researchers show awareness of what has been done, the methods and procedures adopted and the conclusions reached in previous studies, and where the researcher identifies with or diverges from the current

state of knowledge in the domain or discipline being investigated. The choice of tense to report this knowledge is critical to invest in the researcher membership of the specific academic community and to create a niche for the current study. This underscores the need for the present study to investigate tense choice in the LRS of academic research projects among Nigerian undergraduates using samples from one private university.

3.1 Theoretical framework and methodology

3.1.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used is Comrie's (1985) theory of tense. According to the theory, absolute tenses take the present moment as a deictic centre, that is, the time of utterance. Reichenbach (1947) first proposed this theory and identified three-time points for the analysis of tense: time of event (E), reference point (R), and time of speech (S). This proposition was moderated by Comrie (1985), who argues that all that is needed to represent these three absolute tenses is two-time points instead namely, S and E, and three other relations (simultaneity, anteriority and posteriority), although he uses three ordering relatives: "simul", "before" and "after", unlike Reichenbach' as shown in Serial Number 1-3 on Table 2 below. According to Comrie, there are other ordering relatives that are necessary for the representation of the other tenses as shown in Serial Numbers 4-7 on Table 2.

Table 2: Illustration of Comrie's theory of tense

	Schema	Tense	Example
1.	E simul S	present tense	I promise to pay you 100 naira.
2.	E before S	past tense	Fifteen minutes ago, Daniel was in the department.
3.	E after S	future tense	I will become 29 next year.
4.	E before R before S	past perfect	Susan left for the front. By the time she would return, the fields would have been burnt to debris.
5.	E before R after S	future perfect	In a fortnight, I will have left the country.
6.	E after R before S	future in the past	I never thought she would write the best script.
7.	E after R after S	future in the future	I will be going to visit the company.

Reichenbach (1947) goes ahead to argue that these three points are relevant to every one of the tenses including past perfect and future perfect, although Comrie (1985, p. 78) rejects Reichenbach's analysis in which "the past tense involves a past point reference, whereas the present perfect involves a reference point that coincides with the point of speech" (Kuleuven, 1986, p. 308). In the primitives, the role played is that absolute tenses express a relation between S and E, while reference point (R) only plays a role in the expression of absolute-relative tenses.

While Comrie (1985, p. 125) emphasizes that the relative position of E and S is not specific, two major types of temporal relations are expressed by tenses: the first is between R and S, and the second is between R and E. The reference point R only plays a role in the expression of absolute-relative tenses. The three absolute tenses are present, past and future, and the relative tenses are defined relatively to an additional reference point which does not (necessarily) correspond with the moment of utterance (Comrie 1985, p. 122). In absolute-relative tenses, the "reference point is established relative to the present

moment, and a situation is in time relative to that reference point" (Comrie, 1985, p. 125). It is important to note that the relative position of E and S is not specified. Note also that from the table, "the distinction between the English simple past and the present perfect is not clearly made; so in terms of location in time, the perfect is not distinct from the past" (Comrie 1985, p. 78). This theory is necessary in the discussion of certain choices in academic citations of Nigerian undergraduate students, and would, therefore, be employed in identifying the choices of these tenses in the students' research projects.

3.1.2 Methodology

The data used for the analysis were randomly sampled from the LRS of 10 undergraduate projects drawn from two faculties in Veritas University, Abuja: Faculty of Humanities (FH) and Faculty of Natural and Applied Sciences (FNAS). Two departments from FH were selected: the Department of English and Literary Studies, and the Department of History and International Relations, while three departments were selected from FNAS: the Department of Pure and Applied Physics, Department of Biological

Sciences, and the Department of Pure and Applied Chemistry. Six projects were sampled from the Faculty of FNAS (two from each department), whereas four projects (two from each department) were sampled from FH. The texts selected were coded Texts 1-10.

The researchers read through the LRSs of each research project to determine (i) points of citation, (ii) tense choice used to report on the citation, and (iii) frequency of occurrence. Each tense choice was coded as follows: simple present (T_1), simple past (T_2), simple future (T_3), present perfect (T_4), past perfect (T_5), modal (T_6), and the present continuous (T_7).

4.1 Findings and Discussion

The findings present analyses of the verb tenses in academic citations drawn from an estimated corpus of 23,877 words. The number of occurrences and percentages of the verb tenses are organised according to the most used verbs by undergraduate students in their academic citations. For example, Table 3 shows the frequencies of the tense choices in the academic citations among the undergraduates from the sampled projects by department as well as the sample texts from the selected departments.

Table 3: Tenses in the sampled texts and departments

Tense	Code	English & Literary Studies		History & International relations		Biological Sciences		Pure & Applied Physics		Pure & Applied Chemistry		Total
		Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4	Text 5	Text 6	Text 7	Text 8	Text 9	Text 10	
Simple present	T_1	66	42	13	17	19	30	7	4	23	8	229
Simple past	T_2	22	16	13	9	10	11	9	3	7	12	112
Simple future	T_3	0	1	0	0	2	2	0	0	1	0	6
Present perfect	T_4	2	5	3	1	10	5	0	3	3	6	38
Past perfect	T_5	2	2	0	0	2	1	0	0	2	0	9
Modals	T_6	6	3	0	1	3	6	0	0	8	5	32
Present continuous	T_7	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	1	5

Table 4: Summary of the number of occurrences and percentages of tense choices

Verb tense	Times of occurrence	Percentage
T_1	229	53.13%
T_2	112	25.99%
T_4	38	8.82%
T_6	32	7.42%
T_5	9	2.09%
T_3	6	1.39%
T_7	5	1.16%

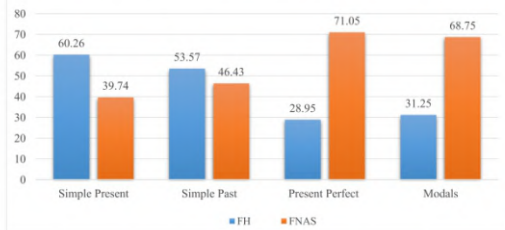
Tables 3 and 4 show the number of tenses as well as their percentages abstracted from each of the department. The tables reveal that the simple present tense is the most used in all the departments with a total number of 229

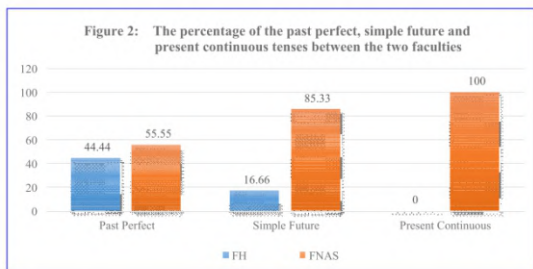
(53.13%), followed by the simple past (122 or 25.99%), simple perfect (38 or 8.82%), modals (31 or 7.42%), past perfect (nine or 2.09%), simple future (six or 1.39%) and present continuous (five or 1.16%).

Table 5: Percentage of tense choices between FH and FNAS

Verb Tense	Times of occurrence	Percentage in the entire corpus	Percentage in FH	Percentage in FNAS
Simple present	229	53.13%	138 (60.26%)	91 (39.74%)
Simple past	112	25.99%	60 (53.57%)	52 (46.43%)
Present perfect	38	8.81%	11 (28.95%)	27 (71.05%)
Modals	32	7.42%	10 (31.25%)	22 (68.75%)
Past perfect	9	2.09%	4 (44.45%)	5 (55.55%)
Simple future	6	1.39%	1 (16.67%)	5 (83.33%)
Present contd	5	1.16%	0 (0%)	5 (100%)

Figure 1: The percentage of the simple present, simple past, present perfect and modals between the two faculties





The researchers place the two faculties side by side in Table 5 and Figures 1&2 in order to show the differences in the various tense choices in the academic citations of Veritas University undergraduates of selected fields of study. While Table 5 shows the times of occurrence, the percentage in the entire corpus, in FH and in FNAS, Figure 1 is an explanation of the percentage of tenses in simple present, simple past, present perfect as well as modals as used in the two faculties. And Figure 2 sums up the percentage of the remaining tenses – past perfect, simple future and present continuous tenses – as used in both faculties. From the table and figures, it is evident that the T_1 occurs 138 times (60.26%) in FH (abstracted only from four texts), as against 91 times (39.74%) in FNAS (abstracted from six texts). The same is applicable to T_2 where it occurs 60 times (or 53.57%) in FH as against 52 times (46.43%) in FNAS. But other tenses such as T_4 , T_6 , T_5 , T_3 and T_7 occur more in FNAS than in FH.

For instance, the T_4 occurs 27 times (71.05%) in FNAS as against 11 times

(28.95%) in FH. For the modal tense (or T_6), it occurs 10 times (31.25%) in FH than in FNAS, where it occurs 68.75 per cent or only 22 times. The same is witnessed in T_7 , where the tense does not even occur in the citation of the entire corpus collected from FH. But it does occur five times (100%) in FNAS. For T_5 and T_3 , the time of occurrence in the entire corpus is nine and six, respectively. But, while the T_5 occurs five times (55.55%) in FNAS, it only occurs one time (16.67%) in FH. On the other hand, the T_3 only occurs one time (16.67%) in FH, but it occurs five times (83.33%) in FNAS.

From the texts analysed, seven tenses were identified, and the simple present tense (T_1) is the most dominant tense in the academic citations of Nigerian undergraduates, representing 53.13 per cent (or occurring 229 times) which is more than half of the tenses in the entire corpus of the selected texts from the two faculties. The result from the T_1 is not a surprise, because previous studies (e.g. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999; Wang & Tu, 2014; Alzuhairy, 2016; Ozturt, 2019; Sabra, 2020) reveal that the T_1 is usually

the most commonly used tense not only in spoken English, but also in written English. The reason behind the frequent occurrence of the T_1 could be traced to the multiple usages that the T_1 has (Alzuhairi, 2016, p. 31). For instance, Comrie (1985) argues that the T_1 has several usages than any other tense. In fact, it is the most commonly used tense in academic writing. The reason is that absolute tenses take the present moment as a deictic centre, making the T_1 to be usually considered as the “default”,

unless there is a certain reason to choose another tense. The tense in particular is used to make general statements, conclusions, and interpretations about findings of current or previous research. It focuses on what is known “now”; and to refer to findings from previous studies without mentioning the author’s name. The following excerpts in Table 6, taken from Texts 1, 4 and 5, demonstrate how different T_1 tenses are used in the academic citations.

Table 6: Excerpts of simple present tense and its uses in academic citations

Excerpt	Use	Sentence
Excerpt A	For the reference to generally accepted knowledge in the field	Cheever et al. (1978) in an Egyptian study of 400 autopsies <i>consider</i> schistosomiasis as the cause of death in 6.2% of all cases and 9.2% of all infected cases.
Excerpt B	For a fact that is currently true	WHO (1988) <i>lists</i> these materials as highly toxic and hazardous.
Excerpt C	For general statements, conclusions and interpretations about findings of current or previous research	The study of Jothi et al. (2010) <i>brings</i> an acute awareness among the people about the quality of underground water by analysing various physicochemical characters.

Generally, the T_1 is the most common tense usage in academic writing in nearly all the disciplines. For example, in FH, which is represented by the Department of English and Literary Studies, and the Department of History and International Relations, the feature occurs 138 times (60.26%) (as explained in Tables 6), to indicate that it is frequently used in arts and humanities than any other faculty, especially the faculties of science. In arts or humanities also, whether it deals with fiction, poetry, or nonfiction literature, the T_1 (also called the literary present tense) in literary studies is employed to discuss the actions and thoughts presented in the text, as literature is

believed to exist as a present phenomenon. The concept of “literary present”, which involves what is called the idea that fiction exists in a timeless world, properly describes in the present tense regardless of whether its author is alive or dead.

Again, most of what is written in history papers will be narrative embedded in some form of the past tense, yet the historic present allows for the T_1 to be used for past time situations. The T_1 , therefore, is used to give a timeless, permanent perspective to what could also have been conceptualised as past occurrences (Huddleston & Pullum 2002, p.

130). Hence, it accounts for the commonness of the simple present in the academic citation of students in FH.

Nevertheless, in Table 6, the T_1 is also used frequently in academic citation among undergraduate students in FNAS, although not as much as that of FH, accounting for 39.74 per cent (or 91 times) of the entire simple tense elicited from the entire corpus. The choice of present tense as noted by Egbe (2014, p. 102) is that it represents a systematic choice to express 'generalisation', whether in passive voice or in active voice. This is why Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 129) regard this feature as the default term in the primary tense system. Hence, it is expected that the T_1

occurs more frequently than other forms of verb tenses during academic citation. Also, the use of T_1 suggests that no commitment is being made to specific suppositions (Egbe, 2014, p. 102).

The second most frequent verb tense as depicted in the data is the simple past tense verb or T_2 . Although it does not occur frequently as that of the T_1 , the T_2 occurs 112 times, representing 25.98 per cent of the verbs of the entire corpus. However, the most common usage is for reference to a single study, particularly for an integral citation of researcher's activity (Lynch, 2014, p. 21). An example provided from data-paper Texts 3 and 5 is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Excerpts of simple past and its uses in academic citations

Excerpt	Use	Sentence
Excerpt D	For reference to a single study	Gilles and Lucas (1963) in a study of 78 school children in a southern city in Nigeria <u>detected</u> haematobium eggs in urine of 71 of them, a prevalence of 91%.
Excerpt E	For a sentence that states a completed action	Tomasz and Rafal (2011) <u>reported</u> the synthesis of magnesium sulphate complex with hexamethylenetetramine and 1,10-phenanthroline, studying the thermal, structural and spectroscopic properties.

However, like the T_1 , the T_2 also occurs more in FH (60/53.57%) than in FNAS (52/46.43%) to indicate that, even though FNAS employs frequently both the T_1 and T_2 , it does not employ it as frequently as that of FH, since, unlike FH, FNAS also employs more of other verbs such as T_4 , T_6 , T_5 , T_3 and T_7 (as shown in Table 5), among others. In other words, the percentage of occurrence in FH over that of FNAS suggests that, although the T_2 is frequently used in science writing, especially in the introduction and LRSs by previous study

(see Egbe, 2014), this study reveals that those of FH (with 53.57%) used the T_2 , like the T_1 , frequently than those of FNAS (with 46.43%), although with a slight difference altogether.

When it comes to the present perfect or T_4 , the results reveal thought-provoking findings. The T_4 is not used more commonly as those of T_1 and T_2 . Instead, it comes out as the third most commonly used verb tense overall. It is located 38 times, representing 8.81 per cent of the entire data with FNAS recording 71.05 per

cent (i.e. 27 times), and FH recording 28.95 per cent (or 11 times) of the entire T_4 located in the corpus, which could be considered a huge number when compared to other verb tenses (e.g. T_6 , T_5 , T_3 , T_7) with smaller percentage. The

most common usage was for reference to an area of research (generally non-integral citations). An example provided from data-paper Text 5 is shown in Table 9.

Table 8: Excerpt of present perfect and its uses in academic citations

Excerpt	Use	Sentence
Excerpt G	For reference to an area of research	1. In most endemic foci, children and adolescents <u>are more exposed</u> and infected than adults are (Beaver <i>et al.</i> , 1984; Tucker, 1986). 2. Beaver <i>et al.</i> (1984) and Tucker (1986) <u>have argued</u> that children and adolescents are infected than adults.

The T_4 has this good number because it is used to emphasise an event whose consequences are still relevant (Bryson 2014, para. 1; Egbe 2014, p. 85). As Table 6 reveals, the T_4 commonly and mostly used in FNAS 27(71.05%) than in FH 11(28.95%), unlike the T_1 and T_2 . The percentage in FNAS is an indication that students of FNAS do not only make use of the T_1 or T_2 during their academic citation in the LRS. They also make more reference using the T_4 than those of FH or any other faculty within Nigerian universities.

The modal verb or T_6 , the past perfect tense or T_5 , the simple future tense or T_3 and the present continuous tense or T_7 , which were discovered to be less commonly used in the academic citations of the students in both faculties, are not commonly tense usages in LRS (literature review section). This is true and is in line with Feak and Swales (2009, p. 51-2), who offers what they call general guidelines for tense usage in the literature review, stating that a writer's choice of tense is subtle and flexible; tense choice is not a question of grammatical rules, but of

appropriateness to academic norms, and to nuances of meaning.

The occurrence of the modal (or T_6) is more frequent in the academic citations of FNAS than those in FH, aligning with the assertion made by Gledhill (2009, p. 2) and Hyland (1994) that, while tense usage is often seen as more or less stable across different registers, the T_6 and the passive verbs are well-known to be more frequently used in scientific texts than in the general language. The T_6 is used to express indirect instructions, occurring mostly in section specifying caution and conditions essentially for certain or expected reactions to occur, and to withhold expressing unmitigated commitment (Egbe, 2014, p. 106).

The T_5 is not frequently used in academic work, except in certain disciplines (such as History and Literary Studies) that need to make distinctions between different points in the past or different points in a narrative's plot. The T_5 occurred nine times, representing 2.08 per cent of the total corpus.

The simple future tense is not often used in academic texts because it tends to carry the

tone of a prediction with a high level of certainty. Since academics are expected to be cautious about their assertions, they make predictions with a sense of certainty which is often (though not always) inappropriate (Bryson, 2014, para. 2). Hence, to solve this problem, when describing a future time or event, an academic paper writer should consider using modal verb or T_6 other than *will* (the verb that most commonly denotes future tense). Thus, the T_6 occurred 32 times, representing 7.42 per cent of the entire corpus investigated.

The T_7 or the progressive tense was located five times, which represented 1.16 per cent of the corpus. The T_7 and other progressive aspects may be used, for example, in literary studies where there is a need to describing the actions of a character in a particular scene. However, the T_7 is not commonly used in academic writing, unless there is a specific need to emphasise the continuing nature of an action. The tense is often preferable to revert to a simple aspect, but seems to pose certain difficulties to the undergraduate students. Figure 2 depicts the percentage of the occurrence of less common tenses (T_5 , T_3 , T_7) as used by the students in the entire corpus.

5.1 Conclusion

The study has identified the tense choices in academic citations among Nigerian undergraduates using Veritas University, Abuja as case study. Ten academic undergraduate projects drawn from five departments and two faculties (Humanities and Sciences) were collected randomly and analyzed. Different tense choices such as simple present (T_1), simple past (T_2), simple future (T_3), present perfect (T_4), past perfect (T_5), modal (T_6) and present continuous (T_7) tenses were identified, exemplified and discussed. Nigerian undergraduates, especially those of humanities and science disciplines use more simple present and simple past in writing the literature review section of research projects. The study concludes that the sampled research projects demonstrate that writers of the research have demonstrated membership of their various academic disciplines in the choice of the appropriate tense in reporting the literature review sections of the identified sections of written academic discourse. Whether such appropriate choice of tense applies to other sections of the research project and indeed the entire research endeavour remains the concern of another investigation.

References

- Alzuhairy, U. (2016). *The frequency of the twelve verb tenses in academic papers written by native speakers*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Central Florida Orlando.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Longman.
- Bryson, S. (2014). *Common uses of tenses in academic writing*. Retrieved from <https://www.scribbr.com/language-rules/tenses/>
- Bussmann, H., Trauth, G., Kazzazi, K. & Bussmann, H. (1996). *Routledge dictionary of language and linguistics*. Routledge.

- Çakır, I. (2011). Problems in teaching tenses to Turkish learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 1(2), 123-127.
- Comrie, B. (1985). *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Egbe, G. B. (2014). *Patterns of EST writing*. Kraft Books Limited.
- Feak C. & Swales J. (2009). *Telling a research story: Writing a literature review*. University of Michigan Press.
- Fum, D., Pani, B. & Tasso, C. (1991). *Teaching the English tense: Integrating naive and formal grammars in an intelligent tutor for foreign language teaching*. <https://www.aclweb.org/anthology/E91-1026.pdf>
- Gledhill, C. (2009). Colligation and the cohesive function of present and past tense in the Scientific research article. In D. Banks, *Les temps et les textes de spécialité* l'Harmattan. pp. 65-84.
- Hinkel, E. (1992). L2 tense and time reference. *TESOL Quarterly* 26(3): 556-72.
- Huddleston, R. & Pullum, T. (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hyland, K. (1999). Academic attribution: Citation and the construction of disciplinary knowledge. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(3), 341-367.
- Jordan, R. R. (1999). *Academic writing course: Study skills in English*. Pearson Education.
- Lamptey, R. B. & Atta-Obeng, H. (2012). *Challenges with reference citations among postgraduate students at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology*, Kumasi, Ghana. *Journal of Science and Technology*, 32(3), 69-80 Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jst.v32i3.8>.
- Kuleuven, R. D. (1986). From Reichenbach (1947) to Comrie (1985) and beyond. *Lingua*, 70, 305-364.
- Lamidi, M. T. (2010). Tense and aspect in English and Yoruba: Problem areas of Yoruba learners of English. *Journal of Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 13(2), 349-358
- Lynch, T. (2014). *Writing up your PhD: Qualitative Research*. Retrieved from https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/writing_up_your_phd_qualitative_research.pdf
- Malcolm, L. (1987). What rules govern tense usage in scientific articles? *English for Specific Purposes*, 6(1), 31-43.
- Neville, C. (2007). *The complete guide to referencing and avoiding plagiarism* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
- Ozturt, I. (2019). A function-first approach to verb tense usage in research article introductions in applied linguistics. *Dil Dergisi Language Journal*, 170(2), 30-52.
- Quirk, R. & Greenbaum, S. (1973). *A university grammar of English*. Research Education.
- Reichenbach, H. (1947). *Elements of symbolic logic*. The Free Press and Collier-Macmillan.
- Sabra, A. (2020). *Tense and aspect in the English language*. An Unpublished Bachelor Degree, University of Gavl.
- Wang, S. & Tu, P. (2014). Tense use and more analysis in Journal article abstracts. *Taiwan Journal of TESOL*, 11(1), 3-29.
- **Sunday Ibibi Patrick** is a Masters student in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Veritas University, Abuja. He can be reached at: patrick@s@veritas.edu.ng.
 - **Edadi Ilem Ukam** is a doctoral student in the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He can be reached at: ukammichael2015@gmail.com and ukamedadiilem@gmail.com.
 - **Gabriel B. Egbe** is a Professor of English in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Veritas University, Abuja. He can be reached at gbasseyegbe@gmail.com and egbe2004@yahoo.com.