

## Conference Paper

# English Tense Use in Indonesian Journal Articles

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### Abstract

This paper reports a study of English tense use in second language writing. Attempting to validate Oster's (1981) claims on tense use as a rhetorical device in discourse, the study seeks to find out whether Indonesian writers' use of English tense conforms or confront the previous claims. The data are drawn from twelve journal articles taken from three different Indonesian scientific journals. The use of tense is accounted and analyzed according to the rhetorical functions it plays. The results show that 89% of the present tense verbs are used differently. Contrary to Oster's claim, this study proves that present tense is also used for generalization. This study also indicates that simple present tense is used more frequently within non-integral citations than the use of simple past tense and present perfect tense in reporting past literature. This paper argues that professional writers are more likely to employ non-integral citations to promote their own ideas to the readers. This is shown by the prominent use of non-integral citations and their combination with the present tense.

**Keywords:** tense use, Oster's claims, rhetorical functions, Indonesian writers

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## 1. Introduction

ESL students face a multitude of challenges in academic settings. One of those challenges is the expectation to produce well-written papers. Unfortunately, very often ESL students' grammatical errors impede the unity, coherence, and meaning that they try to communicate in their papers. The common grammatical error among ESL students is their use of English tenses. In fact, English tense and aspect are described as the "traditional stumbling-block for learners" (Swales, 2011) and one of the difficult grammatical areas for ESL/EFL students to master (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Larsen-Freeman, Kuehn, & Haccius, 2011). This study is interested in exploring if there are patterns to how Indonesian writers use English tenses when reporting previous studies.

Several hypotheses on how English tenses are used as a rhetorical means have also been proposed by different studies. Three studies done between 1972 and 1987 on English tense use are going to be presented below. First, Lackstrom et al. (1972) proposed three hypotheses on how English tenses are used to report past studies:

1. If the author wishes to claim no generality for the facts given in support of a core idea, the information will be presented in the past tense.

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2. If the author wishes to convey to the reader that the information is in support of the core idea but does not wish to commit himself to future events, the information will be presented in the present perfect tense.
3. If the author wishes to claim generality, the information will be presented in present tense.

Lackstrom et al. perceive generality as a continuum. The researchers assert that the choice of tenses depends on how strong a writer believes in the claim he/she makes.

Another study of tense use in academic articles by Oster (1981) has a different stance. In her report Oster proposed different rhetorical functions played by English tenses. Oster proposes the following hypothesis:

1. Present perfect tense is primarily use to indicate the continued discussion of some of the information in the sentence in which the present perfect tense occurs as a main tense. Its secondary use is to claim generality about past literature.
2. Past tense has two primary uses. Its first primary use is to claim non-generality about past literature. Its second primary use is to refer to quantitative results of past literature that are non-supportive of some aspects of the work described in the technical article.
3. Present tense is primarily used to refer to quantitative results of past literature that are supportive of or non-relevant to some aspect of the work described in the technical article. The second primary use of present tense is to refer to past literature, rather than to discuss it. (Oster, 1981:77)

Malcolm (1987) in her study compared the rhetorical functions of tenses and correlate them with the grammatical rules in general English. The rhetorical functions are based on the two orientation axes: the referential axis and the deictic axis (p.33). Both orientations are different in what they refer to. While the referential axis refers to the field of an experiment, the deictic axis refers to the medium of that experiment. This study proposes three hypotheses. (Malcolm, 1987: 36).

Hypothesis 1: Generalizations (indicated by verbs without "researcher" agents) will be in the present tense

Hypothesis 2: References to specific experiments (indicated by researcher agent and a footnote to only one study) will be in the past tense

Hypothesis 3: Reference to areas of inquiry (indicated by a researcher agent and a footnote to more than one study) would be in the present perfect tense

These three studies are summarized in Table 1 below.

From these three studies, the use of present tense to claim generality is similar between Lackstrom et al. (1972) and Malcolm (1987). Oster's (1981) study, on the other hand, theorized that this function is expressed by the present perfect tense. However, although the data she used for her study is supportive of her claims, it only involves two articles from science and technology. Oster did point out in her report that the hypotheses may not be generalized to other data.

Studies/Claims	Lackstrom, et al. (1972)	Oster (1981)	Malcolm (1987)
Generality	Present tense	Present perfect	Present tense
Non-generality	Past tense	Past tense	Past tense
Areas of inquiry			Present perfect
Past literature		Present tense	
Supportive result of past literature	Present perfect	Present tense	

TABLE 1: Studies on the rhetorical use of English tenses.

This present study is an attempt to validate Oster’s claims with an increased number of journal articles. Specifically, this study aims at answering the following questions:

1. Are there patterns in the Indonesian writers’ journal articles on their use of tense when reporting previous studies?
2. Does the use of tense by Indonesian writers conform Oster’s claims?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Data

The data are taken from the introduction and result sections of twelve research articles from three journals published in Indonesia from their freely available online database. These twelve journal articles consist of four articles from Indonesia University Journal “Makara”, four articles from the journal “Agrivita” of Brawijaya University, and four articles from the “TEFL Indonesia” journal. These journals are from three disciplines: agriculture, English Language Teaching, and basic science. The writers of these articles are all Indonesians. From the articles the data was drawn by extracting clauses that report on the work of other researchers.

### 2.2. Analysis

To explore the research questions above, this study uses Oster’s Hypotheses (1981) as a framework to analyze the data. There are two tasks done in the analysis. The first task is to talk about the data quantitatively. In order to do that, both the introduction and result sections of the twelve articles were read to locate the sentences that contain citations and reporting language of past literature. From the citations, finite verbs were then drawn and counted to be used as quantitative measures. The second task was to connect the finite verbs from the clauses with the rhetorical functions proposed by Oster’s (1981) hypotheses.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Table 2 below summarizes the instances of each tense use in all three journals. These instances are tokens of all the finite verbs used within citations.

Introduction Section				
Journal/Tense	Present Perfect	Past	Present	Sum
Makara	11	5	23	39
Agrivita	10	17	21	48
TEFLIN	6	6	59	71
Result Section				
Makara	1	7	32	40
Agrivita	2	37	23	62
TEFLIN	0	13	37	50
Sum	30 (9.7%)	85 (27.4%)	195 (63%)	310
Total Finite Verbs: 310				

TABLE 2: Finite verbs summary.

### 3.1. Present Perfect Tense

This section will first examine the use of present perfect. As shown in Table 2 there are 30 instances or 9.7% of present perfect use of the total 310 finite verbs. The primary use of present perfect as stated in Oster’s hypotheses is to indicate the continued discussion of some of the information in the sentence in which the present perfect tense occurs as a main tense.

From the data, there are 10 instances or 34% out of 30 of this tense that attested the first hypothesis. According to Oster’s hypothesis, the occurrence of present perfect indicates that the information within the sentence would be continued or mentioned in the following sentences. Excerpt 1 is an extract from an article of the “Makara” journal, where two instances of present perfect appear. The present perfect occurs in the first sentence in two finite verbs: *have been published* and *have reported*. The information regarding the synthesis methods in the first sentence is then continued in the next two sentences.

#### Excerpt 1

##### Introduction

*Several methods have been published for synthesizing Fe3O4 powders, and several research studies have reported the successful preparation of nano- or microscale Fe3O4. Using different methods, such as the ultrasonic chemical coprecipitation methods [2] and the solvothermal method [4], Hai et al., 2010 [6] reported the synthesis of nanoparticle Fe3O4 in organic solvent, and Cuyper et al., 2003 [7] successfully fabricated magnetic Fe3O4 covered with a modifiable phospholipid coat. Of these methods, chemical coprecipitation was reported to be the most promising because of its simplicity and productivity [8-10].*

Present perfect also tends to occur in the first position of the paragraph. The continued information is then mentioned in the following sentence. In this extract as shown in Excerpt 2, the use of present perfect is shown within paragraphs 6 and 9

as the first sentence. In paragraphs 6 the discussion of *pyraclostrobin as nitric oxide* stimulant is continued in the next sentence by mentioning the *increased nitrate uptake and assimilation*.

Paragraph 9 starts by stating “several researches” on Nitrogen responses and continues the discussion by detailing individual research, i.e. *Brown et al., (1993)*. This individual research is reported in past tense that distinguishes it from the present perfect sentence. The presence of present perfect in the first sentence seems to signal readers that the writer has a list of previous studies that he is going to talk about. Sentence (3) in paragraph 9 supports the first and second sentence that appears to be studies on other crops and not on corn. However, these studies on sentence (3) show similar response toward Nitrogen that the first and second sentence mention.

## Excerpt 2

### *Introduction*

(1) Research has shown that *pyraclostrobin* was important in stimulating nitric oxide, a key messenger in plants (Conrath et al., 2004). (2) Increased nitrate uptake and assimilation following the application of a strobilurin fungicide would justify additional fertilizer at the time of application. (3) Identifying fertilizers that synergistically increase yield with a fungicide treatment would provide opportunities to manage disease, reduce application costs, and provide additional fertilizer when crop demand was greatest.

(1) Several researches on corn have shown variability in N response. (2) Brown et al., (1993) reported that economically optimal N rates among 77 sites in Illinois ranged from zero to more than 200 lb N per acre. (3) Results from other studies show similar variability in time and space.

This function of the present perfect is closely related to its secondary use, i.e. to claim generality about past literature. According to Oster, the primary use of present perfect deals with the physical textual location of the continued discussion. As Oster puts it, the presence of present perfect indicates a promise that part of the information in the sentence within which the tense occurs will be continued in the subsequent discourse. The secondary use, on the other hand, deals with the semantic domain. The information within which the present perfect tense occurs is a generality of the more specific information that is going to be discussed in the subsequent discourse. In Oster’s hypothesis, this second use of present perfect tend to list the quantity of studies that have been done and then specify individual studies in the following discourse. This study found 3 or 10.3% out of 30 instances of present perfect use in support of this hypothesis.

## Excerpt 3

*Several methods have been published for synthesizing Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> powders, and several research studies have reported the successful preparation of nano- or microscale Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>. Using different methods, such as the ultrasonic chemical coprecipitation methods [2] and*

*the solvothermal method [4], Hai et al., 2010 [6] reported the synthesis of nanoparticle Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> in organic solvent, and Cuyper et al., 2003 [7] successfully fabricated magnetic Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> covered with a modifiable phospholipid coat. Of these methods, chemical coprecipitation was reported to be the most promising because of its simplicity and productivity [8-10]. (Article #3).*

#### Excerpt 4

*The role of the dehydration responsive element binding type 1A (DREB1A) gene in improving crop tolerance to abiotic stress has been studied [12-18]. DREB1A plays an important role as a transcription factor in the regulating of plant responses to abiotic stress by inducing other genes associated with tolerance to abiotic stresses, such as high salinity [12-14], drought [15-16], and cold [17-18]. (Article #4).*

The data shows that when indicating generality, writers in the texts start with expressions such as *several studies*, *several research have shown*, *results from many previous studies have proven* as also shown in excerpt 3. In excerpt 4, generality is not indicated as such but the writer puts the list of previous studies in brackets.

In excerpt 3 the first sentence states the general claim of the different methods for synthesizing Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> powders and the success. The following sentences in this paragraph then provide specific studies that support this general claim. A rather similar strategy is also employed by the writer in excerpt 4. However, the writer also lists all the references in the first sentence. The role of *DREB1A* in reaction toward *a biotic stress* is then specified in the subsequent sentences.

### 3.2. Past Tense

The second hypothesis presents two primary uses of past tense. First it is used to claim non-generality about past literature, and second, it is used to refer to quantitative results of past literature that are non-supportive of some aspects of the work described.

The use of present perfect in the first hypothesis co-occurs with the use of past tense in the data. There are 5 or 3% out of 30 instances of such use found. When writers claim generality, the present perfect is used and all supporting studies are listed within the frame of present perfect. Past tense is then used to talk about individual studies.

In the semantic domain, Oster (1981) assert that past tense occupies a lower level of generality, while present perfect occupies the higher level. As shown in excerpt 3, the present perfect *have been published* and *have reported* are used to make general statement about *Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> powders synthesis* and then past tense is used to talk about how *Hai et al., 2010 [6] reported the synthesis* or how *Cuyper et al., 2003 [7] successfully fabricated magnetic Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>*.

In excerpt 4 however, present tense is used instead of past tense to refer to supporting past studies. The difference between the two approaches is that in excerpt

3 the writer used a strong author orientation (Swales, 2011) where the writer adopt reporting language and put the reference as agent of the sentence. Excerpt 4 on the other hand, frames the language to put the subject or areas of inquiry as agent of the sentence (Malcolm, 1987; Swales, 2011)

As for the second primary use of past tense, where past tense is used to refer to unsupportive past studies, there is no instance found that supports this second part of the hypothesis. Interestingly, past tense is used by the authors when referring to past studies that are actually supportive of the present study. There are 10 or 50% out of 21 instances found in the result section that show this trend. Also, all the 10 instances only occur in the agriculture journal "Agrivita." The other two journals employ present tense when discussing the supportive past studies.

### Excerpt 5

*Results of this study were in accordance with those of done by... (Article #6). Similar results were also reported on dry paddy (Kabirun, 2002 (Article #6)). The same trends were also recorded for N, P, K, and Ca (Liu et al., 2000) (Article#7).*

### 3.3. Present Tense

The third hypothesis in Oster's work claims two primary use of present tense. These functions will be repeated here for easy access. First, it is used to refer to quantitative results of past literature that are supportive of or non-relevant to some aspect of the work described in the technical article and second, to refer to quantitative results of past literature that are non-supportive of some aspects of the work described in the technical article.

The sample texts in this study show a prevalent use of present tense in both introduction and result sections. 195 or 63% out of 310 instances of present tense are used across the three journal articles. Of this sum, 121 or 62% instances are found in the ELT "TEFLIN" journal articles.

As noted in the hypothesis regarding the first primary use of present tense, any results of past studies that are quantitative in nature and are supportive of the ongoing work should be written in present tense. The data attested 10 or 11% out of 92 instances of this use in the result section. Of the three journal articles, only the basic science and agriculture journals demonstrate this use in their result section as can be seen from excerpt 6.

### Excerpt 6

*Similar results were reported by Moussa et al. (2011) for branch number per plant and plant length characters of six sweet potato cultivars grown under two locations during two consecutive years (Article #7).*



	Integral	Non-integral
Reporting	Past	Present perfect
Non-reporting		Present (or modal)

TABLE 3: Reporting past literature (Swales, 1990).

Despite the fact that the data attested this use of present tense, the statistics show that the rest 89% of the present tense verbs are used differently. Contrary to Oster's claim, this study proves that present tense is also used for generalization. This tendency is in accordance with Lackstrom et al. (1972) and Malcolm'(1987) claim on generality.

### Excerpt 7

*Salinity influences the productivity and the quality of agricultural crops [4-6]. (Article #4). Sandy soil with low organic matter content has low capacity in holding water and nutrients to support optimal soybean performance (Suzuki and Noble, 2007; Bastida et al., 2010). (Article #5).*

In excerpt 7, the subjects of investigation was put first and then followed by studies that support it. This idea of generalization is expressed in present tense rather than present perfect alone as claimed in Oster's third hypothesis.

The second primary use of present tense, which is to simply refer to past studies, is especially prevalent in the sample texts. However, the references to the past studies are not overtly stated as suggested by the hypothesis. In Oster's own work, expression such as *certain work are described in detailed by X (Reference)* explicitly refer to the past study within the sentence. This pattern is introduced with the preposition "by."

Another perspective to look into the use of tense in citations is Swales's (1990) pioneering genre-based work. It is more interested in the groupings of the references and how the past studies are reported. In his later work, Swales and Feak (2011) argue that citations can be grouped into two kinds: integral or non-integral. An integral citation is when the author being cited is included in the structure of the reporting sentence. Other authors may be cited as the subject in an active sentence and may also be cited as the agent in a passive sentence. In non-integral citations, other authors are put in brackets and are not part of the reporting language. From the results, what seems to matter is in which frame the authors are writing in. In this case I would employ Swales' proposal to organize the references.

When the verbs employed in citations are reporting verbs such as *report, state, claim, note, etc.*, the citations are using the so called Reporting style, while writers may also use the Non-reporting style where the references are grouped in parentheses. The different style and forms of citations and their corresponding tenses are summarized in Table 3.

Contrary to Oster's report that present perfect is used in Non-integral style with reporting frame, individual studies are also reported with present perfect with integral style, as illustrated in Table 4.



	Reporting verbs	Non-reporting verbs
Integral:	Past, present perfect (1) species revisions of <i>H. Undulata</i> become <i>H. Leoparda</i> <u>have been done</u> by Manjaji-Matsumoto and Last [4]. (2) Brown et al. (1993) reported that economically optimal N rates among 77 sites in Illinois ranged from zero to more than 200 lb per acre.	
Non-integral:	Present perfect (3) The role of the dehydration responsive element binding type 1A (DREB1A) gene in improving crop tolerance to abiotic stress <u>has been studied</u> [12-18]. (4) high salinity, <u>drought, and cold, have been discovered</u> and <u>published</u> in various scientific journals [9-11].	Present simple (4) However, the costs of geothermal exploration <u>are very high</u> [14]. (5) Salinity influences the productivity and the quality of agricultural crops [4-6].

TABLE 4: Integral and non-integral citation (adapting Swales, 1990: 149).

This study shows that when the description of the previous literature is integral, the writer would most likely employ reporting verbs and therefore write in the integral frame. Both present perfect and present simple are used to indicate generality of past literature. However, both tenses differ in how the writer wishes to orient the topic of discussion. If the writer wants to talk about the areas of inquiries, present simple is used, while if the writer wants to talk about the investigation, the present perfect tend to be used.

There is also a strong correlation between the number of present tense use and the non-integral citation. All the present tense use in this study seems to co-occur with the non-integral citation. It is a trend across the three journals to use present tense above the two other tenses. Also, the use of non-integral citations exceeds the use of integral citations. This tendency is similar to two other studies where non-integral citations outnumber the integral ones (Hyland, 1999; Thompson, 2000).

Thompson and Tribble (2001) suggest that integral citations give a prominence effect to the writers and are more commonly found in PhD theses in Thompson's (2000) study. A study by Jalilifar and Dabbi (2012) on Iranian master's theses suggested that since academic writing such as master's theses are read by supervisors, the use of integral citation might highlight on the reference of the ideas more and therefore make it less possible for the supervisors to criticize the students' writing. With the same token we can then state that professional writers are more likely to employ non-integral citations to promote their own ideas to the readers. Thus the use of non-integral citations and their combination with the present tense is prominent.

## 4. Conclusion and Implications

Oster's (1981) hypotheses on the use of tense receive ununiform results. Her hypothesis on the use of present perfect to claim generality is attested by only 34% of the data. Present tense is used by Indonesian writers in this study to claim generality besides the present perfect. Present tense is also used to simply refer to other authors' past

studies without discussing them further. This use of present tense is very frequent in this study. Past tense use receives the smallest percentage and probably needs a larger corpus to be able to make stronger claim on this hypothesis.

As a pedagogical implication, I hope this study may give an insight to ESL/EFL teachers in higher education that teaching English tenses in grammar classes is not merely memorizing the 14 kinds of English tenses from grammar books, but should also contextualized the use of tenses in the real word, including the research genres. It is also hoped that teachers and lecturers can find research articles a useful tool in teaching. Moreover, research article may help teachers and lecturers to show the common practice of tense use and citation styles among professional writers and within specific genres.

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