Exploring Past Tense Usage in EFL Hospitality Students' Narrative Essays

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ABSTRACT
This study attempts to analyze the differences of morphological features used by hospitality students in indicating tenses while writing narrative essays. Four participants of different CEFR levels enrolled in a private university in Jakarta were asked to write short essays of a story how they ended up choosing hospitality major. The method utilized discourse hypothesis, in which the morphological features indicating past, non-past, and no verb were categorized and counted. The results show that the most advanced students produce the most variety of tenses, while the lowest produce the least variety of tenses. The results indicate further interesting discussion on how interlanguage paradigm may take more important role in pedagogical approach of EFL classes for vocational students.

Keywords: past tense; narrative essay; interlanguage

INTRODUCTION

Grammar mastery is one important skill to master when studying English as a foreign language. In Indonesia, especially for university students working in hospitality, English mastery is a must, although grammar mastery in written skill is not always the most important (Prima, 2022). One morphological feature that is often under scrutiny is the use of past tense by English language learners in either spoken or written discourse.

Regarding this, several studies regarding English language learners have been ongoing for an extended period. Previous studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 1995; Chiravate, 2011; Bardovi-Harlig in Han & Tarone, 2014; Prima, 2019) have demonstrated the potential to analyze how individuals learning a foreign language express idea through English verbal structure by prompting them to write or tell a story, either verbally or in writing. Variations exist between Indonesian language's use of tense/aspect and verb-agreement marking in comparison to English. This exploration seeks to uncover whether there is a transfer of linguistic patterns from one's native language (L1) during English language production. Embracing the concept that characterizes the interlanguage system of learners as "a system in its own right" (Selinker, 1972), this study does not aim to label non-native

speakers' use of verbal morphology in narrative discourse as incorrect in contrast to the way a native speaker would produce similar utterances.

This present study aims to investigate the utilization of tense and aspect by Indonesian students when constructing meaning in narrative written English. Equipped with interlanguage hypothesis and paradigm, this study attempts to answer the following research question:

(1) What are the differences of tense/aspect used between students belong to different CEFR?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English language has many features of inflectional morphology for denoting tense, aspect, and verb agreement. On the other hand, the Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia) lacks verb inflection for these three elements. Essentially, in Indonesian, there is an absence of verb inflection to indicate tense, aspect, and subject-verb agreement, as highlighted by Anjarningsih & Bastiaanse (2011). Consequently, verbal predicates in Indonesian significantly differ from English, as they do not involve inflectional changes or irregular verb forms to convey tense, aspect, and agreements.

Several research works exploring tense/aspect within a narrative framework have suggested a correlation between narrative structure—specifically, its foregrounding/backgrounding—and the use of verbal morphology, particularly concerning past tense verbs. One study, conducted by Bardovi-Harlig (1995), investigates the occurrence of simple past tense in oral and written narratives produced by learners at different proficiency levels. The findings indicate a higher frequency of past tense usage in foregrounded narrative segments compared to backgrounded ones. Another study by the same researcher (Bardovi-Harlig, 2011 in Han & Tarone, 2014) similarly demonstrates that as learners improve their ability to employ appropriate past tense forms, there is a reduced reliance on lexical temporal adverbs.

Some studies in Indonesia still focus on detecting errors made by learners in the use of past tense (Anjarani & Indahwati, 2019; Panggalih et al., 2023; Susanti, 2017; Triyuono, 2022). Alternately, this study attempts to put the idea of interlanguage that English language learners have their own language system that differs from that of the target language. Interlanguage as introduced by Larry Selinker, is described by Al-Khresheh, M. H. (2015) as a linguistic system generated and utilized by second language learners, significantly influenced by their native language. As English learners acquire the target language, they create a different linguistic system separated from their native tongue. One characteristic is that interlanguage plays as an intermediary stage between the native and target languages. The native language serves as the source, contributing initial elements that progressively integrate with the target language, resulting in a new and distinct linguistic structure—neither wholly the native nor the target language.

In scrutinizing written narrative discourse, it is important to look at how narrative works. This research is investigating how foregrounding and backgrounding affects

morphological feature of verb in past tense used by the students. Hopper (1979) as cited in Bardovi-Harlig (1995) mentioned that the foreground of a story is like the main structure, describing what's happening, while the background adds more details or thoughts about those actions. For example, if someone tells a story, the foreground talks about what's happening, while the background explains more or gives opinions about those events.

When writing or speaking, the main parts that make up the foreground have to follow some rules. It is like keeping the story in order, saying when things happen, and showing that an action is finished. On the other hand, the background gives more information or thoughts about the things mentioned in the main parts. This gives some extra details to better understand what is happening in the story.

RESEARCH METHOD

This is a qualitative study that incorporates the use of Discourse Hypothesis (DH), in which participants were required to create a discourse, in this case written disourse, and the produced discourse is analyzed. This DH is based on study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig (1994a) in a study as quoted by Colome (2013, p. 309).

The study involved four participants, each representing different proficiency levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): A2, B1, B2, and C1. These participants are university students taking hospitality major in Jakarta. and were purposefully selected to ensure a varied range of language skills within the sample. Participants were in their first semester enrolled in English class and they were tasked with writing an essay explaining their reasons for choosing hospitality as their major. This aimed to gain insights into how individuals at various CEFR proficiency levels express their motivations for selecting a major in hospitality through their language use and narrative structure.

The data collection took place on-campus, where the participants were provided with the essay prompt and asked to complete their narratives. The collected essays served as the primary data for analysis. Similar to previous studies by Bardovi-Harlig (1995) and Prima (2019), the analysis focused on examining the use of tense, aspect, and narrative structure within the narratives produced by the participants. Specifically, the study aimed to understand how EFL learners of different CEFR level utilized verbs in narrative essays. However, it is important to note that there are potential limitations of this study, such as the small sample size and the specific nature of the task, which might restrict the generalizability of the findings to a broader context

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
(1) The differences of tense/aspect used between students belong to different CEFR

Table 1 shows that most morphological feature produced by Student 1 (S1) is present tense (21 occurrences) in the foregrounding (F), while for S2 it is simple past

tense in the foregrounding (16 occurrences). Meanwhile, for S3 it is present tense (24 occurrences) and past tense (10 occurrences), and lastly for S4 it is simple past tense (27 occurrences), followed by present tense (18 occurrences).

Table 1. Verbal Morphology distribution of Writing Task

| Morphology distribution | Student 1 - A2 | | S2 - C1 | | S3 - B1 | | S4 - B2 | |
	Foregrounding (F)	Backgrounding (B)	F	B	F	B	F	B
Past								
Simple	3		16		10		27	
Past Progressive			1					
Past Perfect								
Non-Past								
Base	7	2	5	1	3		5	
Present	21		5	2	24	5	18	2
Present Progressive								
Progressive	3		1					
Present Perfect			3					
No Verb								
0 verb					1			
Total Verbs	**34**	**2**	**31**	**3**	**38**	**5**	**50**	**2**

The occurrences of simple past tense in students' essays with lower CEFR (A2 and B1) are lower than that of higher CEFR (B1 and C1). For S2 and S4, whose CEFR levels are C1 and B2 respectively, produce 16 and 27 simple past tense. These occurrences account for more than 50% of the total morphological feature in verbs they produce during the narrative essay writing (52% and 54% respectively).

The results also show that the use of morphological features of past tense and non-past in the backgrounding in their narrative essays is minimum. Thus, although present in all respondents' essays, the number of verbs in backgrounding is only two for S1, three for S2, five for S3, and two for S4.

Interestingly, the most advanced student (S2, who belongs to C1 of CEFR) produced the most variations of morphological features compared to other students shown in Table 1. S2 managed to produce past progressive and also present perfect, which are absent in other students' essays analyzed for this study. On the contrary, the student with the least variation is the student of lower level, which is S1, whose CEFR is A2.

The results of this simple analysis may tell us that the more advanced the students, the more possibility of them using more variety of morphological features, especially regarding with the use past tense in written narrative discourse.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of differences in tense and aspect usage among students' essay at different CEFR levels revealed that students with higher CEFR levels (C1 and B2) exhibited a prevalent reliance on simple past tense, accounting for more than half of their narrative essays. Conversely, lower-level students, particularly those at the A2 proficiency level, demonstrated a narrower range and less diverse use of linguistic features.

Furthermore, while all narratives contained minimal examples of varied tenses in the background of the narrative essays, the most advanced student (C1) notably showed a broader range of tense and aspect usage. This encompassed the inclusion of past progressive and present perfect tenses, which were notably absent in essays from students at lower proficiency levels.

Future studies should delve deeper into the specific tense and aspect markers that distinguish narratives across various CEFR levels. A more extensive and varied participants could provide additional insights into how tense and aspect patterns differ in their writing. Longitudinal studies focusing on students' evolving use of different tenses over time, complemented by qualitative assessments like interviews or writing tasks, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of learners' narrative development. Additionally, researchers may delve into spoken narrative produced by English language learners to compare that of planned versus unplanned speech and also planned versus unplanned written discourse.

Pedagogical approach in addressing current phenomenon, in which more advanced students may create more varieties of morphological features in writing narrative discourse, should consider the interlanguage hypothesis. Learners of lower level may still be at their stage or system which limit the usage of more varieties. To further encourage the students, teacher can add the learning objectives that the more varieties of tenses the students use, the more expressions and different creative ideas can be added in the students' writing.

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