Language Teaching Research 8,1 (2004); pp. 5–29

Tense, aspect and the passive voice in L1 and L2 academic texts

Eli Hinkel *Seattle University*

This study analyses specific written discourse production in which NNSs' usage of English tenses and voice appears to be dramatically different from that of NSs. The data for the study narrowly focuses on a small number of verb phrase features, such as tenses, aspects and the passive voice, examining how they are presented in writing instruction texts and identifying areas of L2 learning in need of intensive instruction. The main goal of the analysis is to identify the patterns and median frequency rates of L1 and L2 uses of three English tenses (the present, the past and the future), two aspects (the progressive and the perfect), and passive verb structures encountered in a NS and NNS corpus of L1 and L2 academic student academic texts (746 essays/226,054 words). The results of the study demonstrate that even after many years of L2 learning and use, advanced NNS students may have difficulty with the conventionalized uses of tenses, aspects and the passive voice in written academic discourse. The paper also offers a few practical techniques to improve NNS students' production of passable L2 written academic prose. Therefore, the types of texts and contexts in which NNSs may choose to use particular tenses, aspects and voice (or to avoid them) represent an important research venue because such investigations can lead to new insights into learners' real-life L2 skills. In particular, in academic writing that all NNS students in universities in English-speaking countries must produce in copious quantities, the issues of tense, aspect and specifically passive voice usage are usually seen as very important (Michaelis, 1994; Nehls, 1988, 1992; Swales and Feak, 2000).

The study presented here analyses specific written discourse production in which NNSs' usage of English tense and voice appears to be dramatically different from that of NSs. The data for the study narrowly focuses on a small number of verb phrase features, such as tenses, aspects and the passive voice, with the goal of identifying areas

Address for correspondence: Eli Hinkel, CLB Program, Seattle University, 620 11th Avenue, Seattle, Washington 98122, USA; e-mail: ehinkel@seattleu.edu

 10.1191/1362168804lr132oa

of L2 learning in need of intensive instruction, in light of the fact that these important features of academic text are barely even mentioned in most writing instructional texts. The paper also offers a few practical techniques to improve NNS students' production of passable L2 written academic prose. The research goal of this study is to analyse the patterns and median frequency rates of L1 and L2 uses of three English tenses (the present, the past and the future with both *will-* and *would-* constructions), two aspects (the progressive and the perfect) and passive verb structures encountered in a NS and NNS corpus of L1 and L2 academic student academic texts (746 essays/226,054 words).

I Introduction

From studies of the meanings and uses of L2 tenses, aspects and active or passive verbs, a number of important findings have emerged in the past several decades. Some are largely concerned with non-native speakers' (NNSs) learning and acquisition of such features of L2 grammar as inflected forms of verbs associated with particular tenses, aspects, and the passive voice markers (Rutherford, 1984; Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993). Others have investigated the L2 meanings and uses of temporality markers and references in specified contexts of various lengths, such as sentences or portions of discourse (Bayley, 1994; DeCarrico, 1986; Hinkel, 1997). In many experimental studies, for example, learners were usually expected to put verbs (or verb phrases) in appropriate forms associated with particular tenses/aspects, or the active or passive voice (Pica, 1994; Pfaff, 1987; Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1985).

There is little doubt that experimental studies of L2 inflected verbs and other markers of tense, aspect and voice have shed a great deal of light on how L2 learners acquire and use the English tense and voice systems. However, when learners participate in controlled experiments that focus on forms of verbs, the requisite tasks are completed and verb forms are produced regardless of whether NNSs (non-native speakers) of English would actually venture to use these particular tenses, aspects and/or voice in real-life L2 text production. For example, if an experimental task requires L2 users to produce an appropriate form of the verb to fill in a blank, some form of the verb is likely to be produced, regardless of whether it is correct, even though in actual language

production, NNSs may simply choose to avoid using complex verb constructions altogether.

II Tenses, aspects and passive in textbooks for writing instruction

The uses of tense, aspect and the passive voice in formal written prose are usually mentioned in texts for writing instruction, although these important features of university-level writing are not addressed in any depth. For instance, Hacker (2003: 169) covers a 'Survey of tenses' that mentions 'present, past, and future, with simple, perfect, and progressive forms in each'. She further notes that 'simple tenses indicate relatively simple time relations' and provides examples of verb forms for simple, progressive, perfect and perfect progressive tenses. In regard to the uses of the passive voice, the author points out that 'active verbs express meaning more emphatically and vigorously than their weaker counterparts . . . verbs in the passive voice', which 'lack strength because their subjects receive the action instead of doing it' (p. 128). Hacker's text points out without elaboration that 'In much scientific writing, the passive voice properly puts the emphasis on the experiment or process being described, not on the researcher' (p. 130). Overall, Hacker's sections on the survey of tenses and the passive voice consist of approximately four and three pages of text, respectively.

Similarly, Beason and Lester's (2000) guide to grammar and usage of features in academic writing provides descriptions of tense meanings and uses, and exercises for editing errors associated predominantly with tense shifts. According to these authors, 'Verb tense indicates when the action occurred' (p. 99) and they specify that the present tense should be used 'to make statements of fact or generalizations' or to describe habitual or repeated actions, and the past is necessary 'when describing or discussing events that were completed in the past' (p. 103). On the other hand, in regard to the uses of passive, Beason and Lester indicate that 'using the passive voice is not really an error because there is no universal rule against using it' (p. 312). In other guides for academic writers, Axelrod and Cooper's (2001) sixth edition of the popular textbook for academic writing devotes a total of five pages to the uses of tense and voice combined.

In general terms, many textbooks on L2 college-level and academic writing include at least a short section on verb tenses and voice and their uses in formal written prose (Raimes, 1992, 1999; Swales and Feak, 1994). Reid (2000: 283) points out that 'writing conventions require specific verb tenses in different academic writing situations'. She explains that abstracts of research reports and background information 'is usually written in present tense, while the actual research is described in past tense or present perfect tense'. According to Reid's brief note, 'verb tense errors can be serious; they often interfere with communication'. While Reid provides three exercises each on tense and active/passive uses, little explanation can be found to guide the L2 writer about when or how particular tenses or voice can be used in academic writing.

Similarly, Smalley, Ruetten and Kozyrev (2000) discuss various combinations of tense and aspect and provide a few exercises on the distinctions between the present simple and the present progressive, as well as the past simple and the past progressive, without any reference to their meanings and contextual implications in formal written prose. In their short overview of the passive and active voice, Smalley, Ruetten and Kozyrev's textbook on L2 academic writing, like other writing texts, states that 'Most writing involves the use of the active voice . . . Sometimes, however, when the doer of the action is unknown, or perhaps the doer of the action is unimportant, the passive voice is appropriate' (p. 372). The three exercises on passive and active voice distinctions largely deal with passive auxiliaries and verb forms.

In general terms, in instructional texts dealing with academic writing, the meanings, functions and uses of various English tenses and voice are not addressed with any degree of detail. Nor are these important features of academic prose usually or prominently connected to the production of academic writing and the contexts appropriate for them. The reason for this important omission in writing instruction may lie in the traditional separation between the teaching of writing and the teaching of grammar, and the subsequent integration and connection is thus implicitly relegated to language learners themselves, without instructional guidance or teaching. On the other hand, by and large, instruction in the meanings of tenses and voice takes place in the domain of grammar

teaching without making tenses relevant to academic (or any other type of) writing, contexts, or types of texts in which specific tenses and voice are more appropriate than others (Celce-Murcia, 1998; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000; Hinkel, 2002a; Jordan, 1997).

III Tenses, aspects and the passive voice in written academic prose in English

In the past several decades since the analysis of academic discourse and text first became established as a domain of research in applied linguistics, much has been written on the functions of tense, aspect and the passive voice in formal academic prose. For instance, Swales' (1990) seminal study of the structure of academic discourse specifies that the uses of grammar features, such as tenses, aspects and the passive voice, are highly conventionalized. While the perfect aspect, for example, can be found in introductory or literature review sections of academic papers, the progressive aspect is hardly ever found in written academic genre. Similarly, uses of the passive voice are largely expected throughout a text.

In other studies, Johns (1997) points out that the conventionalization in the use of tense, aspect and the passive voice does not just apply to the grammar features in formal research articles but also to those in student writing at the university level. Johns explains that formal features of the academic genre 'do not appear to vary considerably from' discipline to discipline and from class to class, nor have the genre requirements varied much in the past few decades (p. 29).

Other researchers of the written academic genre similarly indicate that conventions usually govern the writer's choices of tense and voice in formal prose produced at the university level, regardless of the disciplines (Paltridge, 2001; Weissberg and Buker, 1990). For example, limited contexts that include descriptions of specific events usually take the past tense; on the other hand, generalizations, and generalizable statements and/or descriptions, as well as events that can be assumed to be familiar to most readers (e.g., *water evaporates and condenses*), require the present tense.

In their textbooks for academic writers who are NNSs of English (Swales and Feak, 1994, 2000), explicitly describe the required features of academic writing, text, and register. While

these specialists on instruction in academic L2 writing point out that the formal properties of discourse and text vary among various subsets of the academic genre, some features of academic prose remain rather inflexible: highly frequent uses of the present tense in most sections of formal student papers, only occasional uses of the present perfect specifically limited to literature review sections, past tense contexts in discussions of cases and conclusions, and passive verb constructions throughout the text. Jordan (1997) similarly indicates that L2 academic writers need to receive focused instruction in regularities of tenses, aspects and the passive voice in formal academic writing.

In the teaching of ESL grammar, however, practically all textbooks and instruction on the meanings and uses of tenses discuss the verb forms and functions associated with the future tense. In the teaching of writing, however, the contextual uses of future tense occupy a place on par with those of the present and the past tenses. Textbooks on the teaching of writing for L1 and L2 writers alike explain that the function of the future tense is to refer to actions and events that have yet to begin or that will take place in the future (Axelrod and Cooper, 2001; Hacker, 2003; Kennedy, Kennedy and Holladay, 2002; Lunsford, 2001). However, a vast majority of textbooks for teaching writing or popular writing guides do not point out the pitfalls associated with the strong predictive meanings of the future tense that can be considered somewhat inappropriate in formal academic writing, where hedging, caution and a guarded stance are usually considered requisite (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Jordan, 1997; Swales, 1990).

Practically all researchers of written academic corpora comment on the fact that passive constructions are far more prevalent in the academic genre than in any other (Quirk *et al.*, 1985; Swales, 1990). It is important to note that practically all textbooks for the teaching of writing discussed earlier seem to present passive voice as an undesirable characteristic of written prose and give it minimal attention. On the whole, it is hard to miss incongruities that emerge between the findings of analyses of tense and voice uses in actual academic prose and the presentations of these features of academic writing in instruction.

The study discussed in this paper does not set out to analyse the

uses of tense and voice in published academic writing, which invariably undergoes several rounds of editing and polishing before it sees the light of day. The data for this investigation of L2 uses of tenses and the passive voice focuses on the writing of NS and NNS students enrolled in their degree programmes in four universities in the USA. To date, comparatively few studies have addressed specifically how trained NNS writers employ verb tenses and voice when producing written academic texts, although such types of analyses can find various instructional uses and implications.

IV The study

This study examines the ways in which speakers of seven languages (English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese and Arabic) employ tense, aspect and the passive voice in their L2 academic essays. Specifically, the study focuses on the median frequency rates of uses of the past, present and future tenses, the progressive and the perfect aspects, and the passive verbs (with or without the *by*-phrase) in L1 academic essays of NSs and L2 academic essays of NNSs. Specifically, the study sets out to investigate whether NS and NNS students employed the various types of temporality and voice features similarly in argumentation/exposition essays common in university placement and diagnostic tests of students' writing skills.

V The students

The essays analysed in the study were written by 746 NS and NNS students during routine placement and diagnostic tests in four US universities. All students were admitted to degree programmes and were enrolled in mainstream classes. All students were given 50 minutes (one class period) to write the essays.

The 631 NNSs students who wrote the essays had attained a relatively high level of English language proficiency sufficient for a university admission, and their TOEFL scores ranged from 527 to 617, with a mean of 593. They included 117 speakers of Chinese, 111 of Japanese, 102 of Korean, 113 of Indonesian, 94 of Vietnamese and 94 of Arabic. Of the NNS students, 84% were

holders of US associate degrees earned in various community colleges, and were admitted as transfers at the junior level in four-year comprehensive universities. These students had received at least three years of ESL and composition instruction in the US: they had completed at least a year in academic intensive programmes, followed by two years of academic college training. The remainder included 10% first-year students and 6% graduate students. The first-year students had graduated from US high schools, and the majority had spent at least three years in the USA. The graduate students had similarly completed their ESL studies in US English for Academic Purposes programmes and had resided in English-speaking environments for periods between 22 and 34 months. The 115 NS students were enrolled in required first-year composition classes. These individuals were graduates of US suburban high schools in three states on the east and west coasts and the Midwest.

VI The data

The essays were written in response to one of three prompts:

1. Many people believe that grades do not encourage learning. Do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Be sure to explain your answer using specific reasons and examples.
2. Some people learn best when a classroom lesson is presented in a serious, formal manner. Others prefer a lesson that is enjoyable and entertaining. Explain your views on this issue. Use detailed reasons and examples.
3. Some people choose their major field of study based on their personal interests and are less concerned about future employment possibilities. Others choose majors in fields with a large number of jobs and options for employment. What position do you support? Use detailed reasons and examples.

Of the total, 240 essays were written on Prompt (1), 247 on Prompt (2) and 259 on Prompt (3). The distribution of essays among the three prompts was proximate for students in each L1 group, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of student essays by prompt

L1 group	Prompt 1 grades	Prompt 2 manner	Prompt 3 major	Mean ($\bar{X}$) essay length
NSs	36	40	39	278 words
Chinese	39	39	39	297 words
Japanese	35	34	42	274 words
Korean	33	33	36	275 words
Indonesian	35	37	41	363 words
Vietnamese	30	32	32	325 words
Arabic	32	32	30	312 words
Totals	240	247	259	

VII Data analysis

In this study, past-tense forms of verbs were counted according to their identification markers in grammar texts (e.g., Quirk *et al.*, 1985), including regular and irregular verb forms. For the present tense, the frequency counts included all occurrences of present-tense verbs, that is, the base form (first- and second-person singular and plural, and third-person plural), the inflectionally marked third person singular form, present progressive and present perfect forms, and contractions. For the future tense, the occurrences of *will*, *shall* and *be going to* were counted inclusively as markers of the future tense without distinction.

The frequencies of the progressive and the perfect aspects were counted separately from those of tenses because some studies have shown that the meanings of aspects create an additional level of complexity for NNSs (Hinkel, 1992; Sharwood Smith and Rutherford, 1988). The counts of passive voice constructions included all passive verb phrases (with or without the *by*-phrase), as marked by the presence of the auxiliary *be* in all tenses (with or without contractions).

To determine whether NS and NNS students similarly employed tenses, aspects and the passive, the occurrences of these features in student essay texts were tagged and counted.[1] In addition, the number of words in each essay was counted. Then computations were performed to establish the percentage rate of each feature use. For example, NS essay no. 1 for Prompt 1 consisted of 300 words and included 30 past-tense verbs, that is, 30/300 = 10%), and 6 occurrences of present-tense verbs (6/300 = 2%). The

computations were performed separately for the occurrences of each tense, aspect and passive voice verbs in each essay.

Because the numbers of essays written to each prompt by each L1 group of students were similar, the analysis of frequency rates of tenses, aspects and the passive in students' texts was carried out based on pooled data for all essays combined. The Mann-Whitney U Test was selected as a conservative measure of differences between the NS and NNS data. The Mann-Whitney U Test compares two sets of data based on their ranks below and above the median. For example, NS median frequency percentage rates of tenses, aspects and passive verbs are compared to those in essays of Chinese speakers, then to those of Japanese speakers, and so on.

VIII Results and discussion

The study findings are presented in Table 2. As the results of the analysis demonstrate, speakers of all languages, except Arabic, employed past-tense verbs at significantly higher frequency median rates (from 2.98 to 5.08) than the NS of English (a median frequency rate of 1.81). On the other hand, the academic essays of Arabic speakers contained significantly fewer past-tense verbs (a median frequency rate of 0.52). In particular, in the essays of Indonesian, Japanese and Korean speakers, the median frequency rates of past-tense uses (3.46, 3.94 and 5.08, respectively) were two to three times higher than those in NS texts.

As was mentioned earlier, the paradigmatic usage of tense in formal academic writing is relatively rigidly conventionalized, and in many cases, the appropriateness of particular tenses in context largely depends on the type of the discourse in which particular tenses are employed. Based on her analysis of large written corpora in English, Hunston (2002) comments that the uses of the past tense are mostly associated with narratives, and the present tense with formal academic prose that deals with generalizations, observations, or descriptions.

Several investigations have noted that for speakers of uninflected and tenseless languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, or Vietnamese, the simple past tense is one of the easier English tenses to acquire (Hinkel, 1992; Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1985). The argumentation/exposition prose in the

Table 2 Median frequency rates for tenses, aspects and the passive voice in NS and NNS academic essays (%)

Markers/L1s	NSs	CH	JP	KR	IN	VT	AR
Past tense	1.81	3.11**	3.94**	5.08**	3.46**	2.98*	0.52**
Range	11.88	16.67	12.52	11.82	11.46	8.23	5.77
Present tense	9.72	9.63	9.52	8.52*	9.86	8.12*	8.85*
Range	15.99	13.63	16.05	27.33	17.32	13.78	12.95
Future tense	0.60	0.74*	0.23*	0.34*	0.77*	0.40	0.71
Range	5.68	5.00	5.21	2.29	5.21	2.78	5.23
Predictive would	0.46	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.26*
Range	4.14	3.34	3.79	3.51	2.18	4.43	2.69
Progressive aspect	0.47	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**
Range	3.54	1.96	2.04	1.57	2.66	2.14	0.00
Perfect aspect	0.32	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**
Range	3.33	1.76	1.18	2.31	3.03	1.94	1.67
Passive voice	1.32	0.70**	0.70**	0.75**	0.43**	0.33**	0.59**
Range	4.90	2.28	3.13	3.26	3.10	2.90	3.37

Notes:
All comparisons are relative to NS text.
*1-tailed $p \leq 0.05$.
**2-tailed $p \leq 0.05$.

NNS essays, with the exception of that of NS and Arabic speakers, relied heavily on the recounts of past-time events, experiences and a preponderance of narratives (Hinkel, 2001, 2002b; Schiffrin, 1981). For example, this text was written in response to Prompt 2:

> (1) When I entered university in the US, I did not expect to have entertaining classes. I studied hard to get admission to an American university, and my parents paid a lot of money for my education. So, when I started my studies at the university, I wanted to do very well to get education. But my sociology professor did not really care whether we learned anything or not because he always passed us on to his assistants, and the way he taught was not so interesting for students. So, I decided to study by myself instead of listening to his lectures. My American roommate showed me how to read a textbook and make notes, and I practiced the material with my friends at the library.
>
> (Indonesian)

In (1), the writer argues for the importance of serious classes and recounts his personal past-time experience, narrated in the past tense. In fact, the writer's experience is not generalized to other similar situations, and the text does not contain generalizable present tense constructions. While the writer clearly attempts to provide evidential support for the rhetorical argument that entertaining classes are not desirable or beneficial for some students, the argumentation consists almost entirely of narration.

A NS essay in (2) similarly argues for conducting classes in a serious rather than entertaining manner. However, the NS text includes generalizable observations, structured in the present tense. In fact, both writers in (1) and (2) base their position on their personal experiences and opinions. However, the text in (1) does not extend beyond a past-time recount, and the excerpt in (2) attempts to project a sense of general applicability of its points and depersonalization, as is commonly expected in the written academic genre (Johns, 1997; Swales, 1990).

> (2) A serious lecture or lesson may be most effective with higher-level students. If students have very little time, they may feel the need to get the maximum amount of information in an hour and feel that demonstrations and games, meant to be interactive and engaging, are wasting their time. A serious lecture may also be more appropriate when the information given is important for students to know. Highly entertaining presentations have a high chance of taking away the main points of the class. While I see the benefits and downsides to each teaching style, personally, I prefer a lecture that is serious

and well-organized. When an instructor uses props and things to entertain the class, I begin to feel that I am being treated like a child.

(NS)

It is easy to notice that the writing in (2) seems to be rather basic: the text is repetitious, and the vocabulary is fairly simple. The writer repeats the verbs *feel* and *may* three times each, and the passage includes colloquialisms and clichés, such as *downsides*, *take away* (*the main points*), or *treated like a child*. Nonetheless, the text demonstrates a greater awareness of academic text conventions than the example in (1), which adheres to the simple past tense.

The frequency rates of present tense verbs were significantly lower in the essays of Vietnamese, Korean and Arabic speakers (8.12, 8.52 and 8.85, respectively) than those in NS writing (9.72), while no significant differences are noted between the rates in the essays of NSs and Chinese, Japanese and Korean speakers.

Unlike tenseless languages, Arabic has three morphologically marked tenses: the past, the present and the future. A more important issue, however, pertains to the contexts in which the uses of the past or the present tense are considered to be appropriate. In formal written discourse in Arabic, for instance, sweeping generalizations and formulaic expressions, many of which are borrowed almost verbatim from classical and religious sources are considered to be highly desirable (Ostler, 1987). These differ markedly from the recounts of experiences and story-telling mixed with general truths in the essays of, for example, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese (Hwang, 1987; Jensen, 1987; Maynard, 1998). For example, the following text written in response to Prompt 3:

(3) All parents love their children, and children thrive in loving families like flowers in the garden of life. Children are the future of our life, and parents have a duty to protect their children and give them advice about their major because children are young, and they do not have any experience in choosing majors. For young people, the parents' advice is important to make good choices for the future, and in this way, parents clear and smooth their way and help them avoid the dangers of bad decisions for their majors and all other important things. When young people listen to their parents wisdom, they choose good majors that lead them to a comfortable life, respect from other people, good jobs, and successful futures.

(Arabic)

The example in (3), constructed in the present tense, provides a number of broad-based generalizations and seemingly self-evident truths, for example, *all parents love their children*, *children are the future of our life*, or *parents have a duty to protect their children*. However, the employment of present-tense constructions do not seem to be sufficient to make the NNS essay appear academic. In fact, the text appears to be somewhat off cue primarily due to its sweeping generalities, as well as metaphors (e.g., *children are flowers*, *life is a garden*(?)), which the writer may believe to be universal and obvious.

On the other hand, the present-tense excerpt in (4) is constructed to include several specific points along a series of arguments that are more directly relevant to the essay prompt, for example, *material success–security–salary/profits–high paying job*.

> (4) Due to an ever-changing value system, many men and women choose majors in a field they believe will yield them material success. However, by choosing this road, many forsake happiness for security. Men and women should study what interests them for a plethora of reasons. First, success cannot be measured by one's salary or profits. The misconception that this is true often pulls people to seek a major that will get them a high-paying job upon graduation. Success is measured by the relationships one has, and important personal relationships are bound to suffer if a person chooses an occupation that makes him money instead of doing what he enjoys. Furthermore, the people who first see success as material security will become disillusioned as the time goes on.
>
> (NS)

The text in (4) does not appear to be particularly sophisticated, and as the example in (3), it similarly relies on platitudes and folk wisdom. However, the situations discussed in (4) stay focused on the issue of choosing a major, instead of, for example, discussing roles of parents and children.

In regard to the median rates of the future tense, the results of the data analysis point to the fact that L2 writers may not be fully certain in regards to the functions of this tense in academic writing. Specifically, while the median frequency rates of future tense uses in the essays of Chinese and Indonesian speakers (0.74 and 0.77, respectively) significantly exceeded those of NSs (0.60), in the texts of Japanese and Korean speakers, the occurrences of the future tense were significantly less frequent (0.23 and 0.34, respectively),

but did not differ substantially compared to the essays of Vietnamese and Arabic speakers.

Unlike generalizations that are marked by a predominant use of the present tense, and narratives of past-time experiences, in academic writing, the future tense is employed only occasionally to indicate comparatively definite outcomes that depend on the fulfilment of particular future conditions (Quirk *et al.*, 1985). In NNS essays, however, the uses of the future tense did not necessarily hinge on future conditions that lead to particular results. Rather, in some L2 texts, the future tense was employed in contexts where the simple present tense would be more appropriate. For example:

> (5) Some instructors always give grades very strictly, and their students won't study because they will think that they cannot succeed no matter how hard they try. On the other hand, when the professor is kind, students will appreciate his teaching and do their best. They will not be afraid to ask questions to the teacher, and they will learn more knowledge from him to be successful in the society.
>
> (Chinese)

Both examples in (5) and (6) attempt to predict the inevitable outcomes of the behaviour of particular students and professors; for example, *if professors are too strict, then students will xxx*, or *when students have tests, they will study hard*. Although the inevitable nature of the predicted outcomes may be questionable in the situations discussed in (5) or (6), a more balanced mixture of the present and future tenses in (6) makes the text appear oriented more toward the general present than it is in (5).

> (6) When students have a big test in one class, they will take the time to study. Looking over notes, reading the chapters, and working with others is what is involved with studying. Making yourself learn the material so you will get a good grade is important. Many students would not bother with the extra hours of studying if tests weren't given throughout the term.
>
> (NS)

In addition, the excerpt in (6) includes hypothetical constructions with *would* and *weren't*, which demonstrate a greater grammatical range.

It is interesting to note that a majority of L2 writers in almost all L1 groups (median frequency rates of 0.00), with the exception

of Arabic speakers (0.26), simply chose to avoid the predictive *would* with its syntactic, lexical and pragmatic complexities. In addition to their hypothetical meanings, predictive constructions with *would* can be also used in formal past-tense contexts to refer to actions or events that are in the future 'when seen from the viewpoint in the past' (Quirk *et al.*, 1985). According to Hoye (1997), the meanings and functions of *would* can be further complicated by the epistemic predictive sense associated with its more tentative or more strongly evidential meanings in various contexts, such as attendant adverbials (e.g., *would likely occur*, *would definitely/inevitably occur*) or present-tense hypothetical constructions (e.g., *if xxx, then yyy would occur*). With their complexity and the fact that they are not addressed in most writing texts, it is not particularly surprising that constructions with the predictive *would* were relatively rare in L2 essays. For example:

> (7) Grades encourage students to learn more and do their best. Students get grades in each class they take, based on their assignments, exams, and participation. Grades show the student's sincerity and faithfulness in studying. Of course, this is not so simple as 'the higher the grades, the better the students'. If a student gets a good grade in his class, he would be satisfied with what he has done in his class.
>
> (Korean)

The argument is (7) is constructed largely based on present-tense generalizations, with an inclusion of a mixed simple present–hypothetical *would* in a complex sentence: *if a student gets . . . he would . . .*

On the other hand, the NS text in (8) develops a set of hypothetical situations that necessitates a number of *would* constructions, as well as other predictive markers.

> (8) There would be little point in studying if grades weren't given at all levels of schooling. I am convinced that few students would study if universities abolished grading. Actually, it is not so much that grading is necessary, but some kind of a reward system would encourage students to push themselves harder. An 'A' paper would earn a certain number of points, which could then be exchanged for a prize. Younger children would be able to relate to that better than the typical A, B, C system.
>
> (NS)

Similar to the conspicuously low median rates of would in NNSs essays, the NNSs' frequency rates for the progressive and the perfect aspects demonstrate that a majority of L2 writers simply did not employ aspectual constructions in their writing: median rates of 0.00 in effect mean that fewer than half of all L2 essays in each group contained any verb phrases marked for either the progressive or the perfect aspect. Although Swales (1990) and Swales and Feak (1994) explain that, for example, the uses of the present perfect tense are quite common in introductory sections of academic papers, a majority of NNS writers chose to avoid them (median frequency rates of 0.00 in all L1 groups). For example:

> (9) When I was young, I was crazy about drawing. I drew day and night to express myself. Through drawing I achieved a feeling of success. In addition, I liked the traditional Chinese building. The grand colorful palace, graceful house, all these were fascinating to my eyes. Since then, I made my decision to become an architect in the future.
>
> (Chinese)

In (9) and (10), both writers argue for choosing their majors based on personal interests. Both explain that their choices have been their life-long ambitions that have remained unchanged since their childhood. However, in (9) the NNS writer develops his argument in the form of a past-time narrative, constructed in the past tense. On the other hand, the NS student in (10) relies on the past-to-present relevance implicit in the present perfect tense (Quirk *et al.*, 1985). For example:

> (10) Being a nurse is something that I have always wanted to do. My parents have always believed in doing something that they enjoy, and they have taught me to make my choices in the same way. Those students who choose nursing as their major need to be dedicated to caring for patients, and this is the career I have chosen.
>
> (NS)

The texts in (9) and (10) are of similar lengths, that is, 59 and 60 words respectively. However, the excerpt in (9) contains seven past-tense verbs, and the text in (10) includes four present-simple and four present-perfect verb phrases. On the whole, in L2 essays the tendency to rely on the past tense in lieu of the present-perfect tenses further contributed to the significantly higher rates of the

past-tense verbs in L2 writing of students across all language groups.

In general terms, given the propensity of NNS writers to avoid using syntactically and semantically complex verb structures, the significantly lower median frequency rates for passive constructions in NNS essays, as compared to NS texts, are not particularly surprising. In fact, for all groups, the NNS median frequency rates of passives (from 0.33 to 0.75) were approximately one quarter to one half of the NS median frequency rate (1.32). For example, the NNS writer in (11) used only one passive construction to make her points:

> (11) Grades can measure how well the students achieve their learning. Some students study for self-development, but such people are not many. Students who do not get good grades are encouraged to do better. For example, when I was a high school student, I knew that what I was studying would be useful for me, but still I didn't study hard. Nobody could control me, except grades. The current grading system is not perfect and it is cruel for some students, but we don't have a better system of measuring students' learning.
>
> (Korean)

On the other hand, the NS in (12) makes similar points that although the current grading system has a few shortfalls, there may be few alternatives to replace it. The excerpt in (12) contains five passive constructions and thus seems to project a greater degree of objectivity and detachment, as is expected in the academic genre:

> (12) Students are encouraged to learn and not just get grades. In the school system, we are taught to do our best, and most of us strive to achieve our goals in college. However, there are also students who make low grades, and as a result, these students are discouraged about learning. Grades reflect knowledge no more than wealth reflects class. I believe that until a better grading system is invented, the present one should not be discarded.
>
> (NS)

As was mentioned earlier, the writing of many first-year NS students would be hard to call appropriately academic. Indeed, many (if not most) of these students are basic writers whose writing can hardly be considered a good model. Nonetheless, overall, even the basic NS writers seem to have a far better

command of the prescribed academic tenses and the passive voice than advanced and trained NNS university students.

IX Conclusions and implications for teaching

A quantitative analysis of the uses of English tenses, aspects and voice in NS and NNS academic texts demonstrates that even after many years of L2 learning and use, advanced NNS students may have difficulty with the conventionalized uses of tenses, aspects and the passive voice in written academic discourse. Many studies of relatively rigid academic text conventions have long noted that the simple present tense is highly prevalent in various types of academic genre, such as published articles and student assignments and papers, while the simple past tense is limited to narratives, case studies, or descriptions of specific historical events (e.g., Johns, 1997; Swales, 1990; Paltridge, 2001). In addition, among other recurrent characteristics of academic writing, the pervasive usage of the passive voice has also been commonly associated with formal prose across diverse types of writing produced in the academic milieu.

On the other hand, the results of this study point to the fact that in their university-level writing, trained NNS writers employ past-time narratives with high median rates of the past tense far more frequently than NS students without training in formal academic writing. More importantly, the findings of this investigation show that in general, a majority of advanced NNSs simply choose to avoid using such complex verb phrase constructions as passive voice, the perfect aspect, or predictive/hypothetical *would*.

One interesting exception to the popularity of past-time narratives in lieu of the ubiquitous present-tense descriptions, explanations and generalizable rhetorical support is noted in the essays of Arabic speakers, whose texts are constructed around broad-scope generalizations and seemingly self-evident truths, possibly included as references to common (and obvious) knowledge. However, the uses of the present-tense constructions in such generalizations in L2 texts is not sufficient to make the students' text appear academic if other features of formal academic prose are lacking.

In light of these findings, it appears that L2 grammar and, more

urgently, L2 writing instruction needs to address the prevailing uses of the simple present tense in specific discourse contexts. The results of the analysis presented in this paper show that the teaching also needs to focus on the severely limited purposes of personal and experiential narratives in academic writing. Another point of note is that the practically requisite usage of passive voice in constructing formal written discourse also needs to be taught intensively. On the whole, however, an important implication of this investigation is that although in the past several decades a great deal has been learned about the essential grammar features of academic writing and text, the findings of research may have had a limited impact on L2 grammar and writing instruction, as is evident from a brief examination instructional materials in university-level writing.

To address the instructional needs of L2 academic writers, a few relatively simple teaching techniques may be effective in teaching uses of tenses and passives in academic writing. For example, as was noted earlier, with the exception of references to specific cases studies, events and experiments, for NNS students, following the academic prose conventions associated with the present-tense uses can be greatly simplified when large portions of their assignments and papers (if not entire assignments and papers) can be constructed in the simple present tense. Outside of academic texts required of students in, for instance, history and philosophy, the use of the 'historical present' (McCarthy and Carter, 1994: 100) can allow L2 writers a great deal of flexibility in developing the discourse paradigms, commonly expected in formal writing, e.g., *Smith (2002) finds/notes/mentions/ explains that many investors hesitate to make long-term commitments/buy shares in small companies/research accounting practices.*

Research into L2 learning and acquisition has also found that due to a number of its complex grammatical, lexical and pragmatic features, English passive is very difficult for NNSs to use correctly and in appropriate contexts (Hinkel, 2002a, c; Master, 1991). Furthermore, other investigations have pointed out that English passive constructions are largely collocational and idiomatic (e.g., Hinkel, 2004; Owen, 1993; Wray, 2002; Wray and Perkins, 2000). In light of the many layers of complexity associated with the contextual uses of passives in English, an easy technique that L2

writers can rely on with great effect is to select the verbs that almost always occur in passive and learn and practise using them in context. For example, Swales and Feak (1994, 2000) note that such verbs as *considered, done, found, given, made, shown*, or *used*, are almost always employed in passive constructions, and predominantly in the present tense. These semantically and pragmatically simple passive verbs are so common that they are usually familiar to L2 learners even at the beginning or intermediate levels of L2 proficiency. For this reason, practice with common passive phrases, sentences, or collocational expressions can be combined with other verb constructions in speaking or writing practice (e.g., in combinations with modal verbs or infinitives: *can/may be made/used/done, is considered to be/shown to be*).

In addition to teaching L2 learners the grammar features that are strongly preferred in academic writing, it is also important that the instruction overtly address the syntactic elements of text that should be avoided. For example, the future tense refers to actions and events 'of unusual definiteness, attributing to the future the degree of certainty' usually associated with the present and the past (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 215). In academic writing, such definite references to future activities or states are extremely rare because the writer is usually expected to project a diplomatic, defensive and cautious stance (Swales, 1990). In the context of academic prose, L2 writers need to be strongly encouraged to avoid using the future tense and instead use modal verbs, such as *may*, *can* and *could*. The limited and narrowly constrained uses of *would* in constructing hypothetical rhetorical arguments can be also taught in conjunction with the meanings and functions of modals as a means of expressing proper academic caution and hesitation in advancing claims (Swales, 1990).

Although practically every ESL grammar textbook or course devotes a good deal of time and effort to the teaching of the progressive and the perfect aspects, neither seems to be particularly common in English academic writing (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Jordan, 1997). Research into the written academic register has found that while progressive tenses are common in conversational and spoken discourse, they very rare in academic prose (Hunston, 2002; Paltridge, 2001). Due to their

associations with casual spoken register, the usage of progressive verbs may impart a somewhat conversational flavour to academic writing, and L2 writers can construct more effective academic text when they employ simple present (and occasionally the simple past) tenses (Hinkel, 2004). (An additional benefit of building the text in simple tenses may be a reduction in the number of pervasive problems associated with thorny L2 stative verb constructions, e.g., *agree*, *believe*, *contain*, *know* and *understand*, that cannot be used in the progressive aspect.)

Most importantly, however, it seems that the conventions of academic writing and the attendant uses of tenses, aspects and voice need to be addressed in L2 writing instruction. In the past few decades, the teaching of writing has focused largely on discourse paradigms that deal with macro-features of academic prose, such as the structure of the information flow, discourse moves and shifts, and even documenting sources. However, additionally, it seems imperative that the learners' needs for fundamental skills in text building be addressed and their accessible range of grammatical structures be expanded. The NNS writers' essential skills in citing sources of information appropriately may not be very useful if these students rely on personal narratives to develop rhetorical argumentation in university-level essays and other types of academic papers.

Note

[1] The tagging of tense, aspect and voice did not include counts of errors, nor does the analysis deal with error causes. These textual features were merely counted as they appeared in students' texts.

X References

Axelrod, R. and **Cooper, C.** 2001: *The St. Martin's guide to writing*, sixth edition. New York: St Martin's.

Bayley, R. 1994: Interlanguage variation and the quantitative paradigm: Past tense marking in Chinese-English. In Tarone, E., Gass, S. and Cohen, A., editors, *Research methodology in second-language acquisition*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 157–81.

Beason, L. and **Lester, M.** 2000: *A commonsense guide to grammar and usage*, second edition. Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's.

Celce-Murcia, M. 1998: Discourse analysis and grammar instruction. In

Oaks, D. editor, *Linguistics at work: a reader in applications*, Fort Worth, TX: Hartcourt Brace College Publishers, 687–704.

Celce-Murcia, M. and **Olshtain, E.** 2000: *Discourse and context in language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

DeCarrico, J. 1986: Tense, aspect, and time in the English modality. *TESOL Quarterly* 20(4): 665–82.

Dudley-Evans, T. and **St. John, M.J.** 1998: *Developments in English for specific purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hacker, D. 2003: *A writer's reference*, fifth edition. Boston: Bedford/St Martin's.

Hinkel, E. 1992: L2 tense and time reference. *TESOL Quarterly* 26(3): 556–72.

—— 1997: The past tense and temporal verb meanings in a contextual frame. *TESOL Quarterly* 31(2): 289–313.

—— 2001: Giving examples and telling stories in academic essays. *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 12(2): 149–70.

—— 2002a: Teaching grammar in writing classes: tenses and cohesion. In Hinkel, E. and Fotos, S., editors, *New perspectives on grammar teaching in second language classrooms*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 181–98.

—— 2002b: *Second language writers' text*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

—— 2002c: Why English passive is difficult to teach (and learn). In Hinkel, E. and Fotos, S., editors, *New perspectives on grammar teaching*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 233–60.

—— 2004: *Teaching academic ESL writing: practical techniques in vocabulary and grammar*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hoye, L. 1997: *Adverbs and modality in English*. London: Longman.

Hunston, S. 2002: *Corpora in applied linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hwang, S.J. 1987: *Discourse features of Korean narration*. Arlington, TX: The Summer Institute of Linguistics and The University of Texas.

Jensen, V. 1987: Rhetorical emphases of Taoism. *Rhetorica* 5(3): 219–29.

Johns, A. 1997: *Text, role, and context: developing academic literacies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jordan, R. 1997: *English for academic purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kennedy, X., Kennedy, D. and **Holladay, S.** 2002: *The Bedford guide for college writers*, sixth edition. Boston: Bedford/St Martin's.

Lunsford, A. 2001: *The everyday writer*, second edition. New York: St Martin's Press.

McCarthy, M. and **Carter, R.** 1994: *Language as discourse*. London: Longman.

Master, P. 1991: Active verbs with inanimate subjects in scientific prose.

English for Specific Purposes 10(1): 15–33.

Maynard, S. 1998: *Principles of Japanese discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Michaelis, L. 1994: The ambiguity of the English present perfect. *Journal of Linguistics* 30(1): 111–57.

Nehls, D. 1988: Modality and the expression of future time in English. *IRAL* 26(4): 295–307.

—— 1992: An analysis of verbal aspect. *IRAL* 30(4): 255–80.

Ostler, S. 1987: English in parallels: a comparison of English and Arabic prose. In Connor, U. and Kaplan, R. editors, *Writing across languages: analysis of L2 text*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 169–85.

Owen, C. 1993: Corpus-based grammar and the Heineken effect: lexico-grammatical description for language learners. *Applied Linguistics* 14(2): 167–87.

Paltridge, B. 2001: *Genre and the language learning classroom*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Pfaff, C.W. 1987: Functional approaches to interlanguage. In Pfaff, C.W., editor, *First and second language acquisition processes*, Cambridge, MA: Newbury House, 81–102.

Pica, T. 1994: Questions from the language classroom: research perspectives. *TESOL Quarterly* 28(1): 49–79.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and **Svartvik, J.** 1985: *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. New York: Longman.

Raimes, A. 1992: *Exploring through writing*, second edition. New York: St Martin's Press.

—— 1999: *Keys for writers: a brief handbook*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Reid, J. 2000: *The process of composition*, third edition. New York: Longman.

Rutherford, W. 1984: *Second language grammar learning and teaching*. New York: Longman.

Rutherford, W. and **Sharwood Smith, M.** 1985: Consciousness-raising and universal grammar. In Rutherford, W. and Sharwood Smith, M., editors, *Grammar and second language learning*, New York: Newbury House, 274–82.

Schiffrin, D. 1981: Tense variation in narrative. *Language* 57, 45–62.

Sharwood Smith, M. 1991: Speaking to many minds: on the relevance of different types of language information for the L2 learner. *Second Language Research* 7(2): 18–32.

—— 1993: Input enhancement in instructed SLA: theoretical bases. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15(2): 165–79.

Sharwood Smith, M. and **Rutherford, W.** 1988: *Grammar and second language teaching*. New York: Newbury House.

Smalley, R., Ruetten, M. and **Kozyrev, J.** 2000: *Refining composition skills*, fifth edition. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Swales, J. 1990: *Genre analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. and **Feak, C.** 1994: *Academic writing for graduate students*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

—— 2000: *English in today's research world*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Weissberg, R. and **Buker, S.** 1990: *Writing up research*. New York: Pearson.

Wray, A. 2002: *Formulaic language and the lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wray, A. and **Perkins, M.R.** 2000: The functions of formulaic language: an integrated model. *Language and Communication* 20, 1–28.