



# **EFL Students' Perception on English Tenses Mastery in Improving English Academic Writing**

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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to uncover the perceptions of EFL students on English tenses mastery and their belief in that English tense mastery ensures better improvement in academic writing. The research was engaged in mixed method. Quantitative descriptive method was utilized to study the students' perceptions on English tenses mastery to improve their English academic writing in numerical form and percentage. The qualitative method was focused on the reasons to the students' low competence and their belief in the English tense mastery can lead to the quality of writing. The data collection used Google form in multiple choice and short answer forms. A total of 59 EFL students of English Department of Universitas HKBP Nommensen who took Academic Writing course participated in this research. The results show that: (1) most of the EFL students were familiar with all the names of the English tenses with a total of 62.7% (37 out of 59 respondents); (2) the most number of students (54.2 respondents) can employ some of the tenses in writing; (3) The main reason for the EFL students is unable to apply English grammar, particularly English tenses in writing practice was due to the lack of students' English grammatical competence; (4) around 88.1% of the respondents (52 students) believed that mastering English tenses was the key to improve their writing skill. Accordingly, the teachers need to provide the effective method to advance the students' competence in the uses of the English tense in writing. For the researchers, the research findings provide basic evidence to investigate the issues in the future.

**Keywords:** academic writing, English tenses mastery, EFL students' perception

## **Introduction**

One of the four language skills which is widely regarded as the most challenging for EFL students to master is writing. Writing ability is not just about learning the grammatical rules governing sentence patterns, but also about using those principles in writing (Blanchard & Root, 1994).

English tenses are inextricably linked to English grammatical rules and play a critical role in sentence structure (Aziz et al., 2020). Thus, EFL students interested in learning English must arm themselves with knowledge of the tenses and the ability to use them effectively in English communication. English tenses also play a critical function in producing a comprehensible text when it comes to written communication. However, the disparity in tenses between English (L2) and native languages (L1) has remained a source of contention, particularly in nations where English is a second language.

In the recent decade, study on writing issues has grown in prominence. Wang and Parr (2021) highlighted the difficulties faced by Chinese EFL students when it comes to writing, particularly when it comes to negotiating and establishing one's identity in academic writing. He stressed the essential function that the manner of negotiating writing plays in the writings of teaching practitioners. Nasser (2020) used a variety of research methods to examine the lexical and syntactical difficulty of postgraduate academic writing among university EFL students. This study demonstrated that EFL students' writing is often subordinate in style, whereas native English writers produce phrasal structures. Bada and Ulum (2018) examined active and passive sentence forms in academic writing in greater detail. They contended that academic writing was controlled by active constructs.

The aforementioned research share a common concern with academic writing's grammatical patterns. Additionally, these research underscored the critical importance of sentence structure norms in academic writing (Jayanti, 2019; Azizah and Budiman, 2017; Pasaribu *et al.*, 2021).

English grammatical structures are divided into numerous sub-categories. The English tenses are one of the most perplexing aspects of writing, attracting scholars' attention. The number of studies focusing on tenses has expanded significantly over the previous decade. Numerous researchers have concentrated their efforts on the study of how the English tenses are utilized in English writing. Heryanti, Sucipto and Makmur, (2017) examined the most often occurring grammatical errors in narrative writing. They discovered that the dominant frequent grammatical blunders employed by EFL students were in their usage of English tenses when writing narratives. Rofik and Sahid (2019), Aziz, Fitriani and Amalina (2020), Harun and Abdullah (2020), and Pasaribu (2021) investigated the incorrect usage of tenses by university-level EFL students. They noticed that the errors made by university EFL students were frequently in the area of the application of English tenses in academic writing.

Fitria, (2020), and Masruddin (2019) also conducted more focused investigations on a particular English tense. They discovered that EFL students

struggle with the application of English tenses in writing. The aforementioned research on the English tense in writing all agreed on the importance of the English tenses in writing. However, EFL students struggled to master them in preparation for academic writing.

Numerous scholars have examined how English tenses are used in academic writing by EFL students. However, little research has been conducted on EFL students' perceptions on the English tenses, notably on their competency and conviction in English tense mastery.

Several researchers have done studies on the area of the students' perspectives in writing strategies. Yunus *et al.* (2018) and Nordin, Zabidin and Kamaluddin (2019) explored the EFL students' awareness and perception on the stage prior to writing as the writing strategy. In the similar vein, Fauzan and Ngabut (2018) uncovered the EFL students' viewpoint on the application of flipped learning strategy in class of writing. Referring to the studies, it is obvious that the EFL students' perspectives on the English tenses practice in academic writing are still covered and unexplored. Accordingly, the students' voice how they struggled to employ the English tenses in writing needs to be listened.

## Method

The research employed a mixed method approach. The research used a quantitative descriptive method to examine students' assessments of their ability to grasp English tenses in order to improve their English academic writing. This method aims to analyze data and provide it in numerical and percentage form (Cresswell, 2014). The qualitative method was utilized to ascertain the reasons for students' lack of proficiency in the usage of English tenses in Academic Writing.

The study enrolled 59 students from Universitas HKBP Nommensen's English Department who took an Academic Writing class. The research data consists of EFL learners' perceptions of their competence in the English tenses and if mastery of the English tenses can guarantee the development of the learner's academic writing skills.

The data was collected by giving learners questionnaires via an online survey using Google Forms with the following link: <https://forms.gle/8F2PHi5TNjNaZdm8>. The quantitative questionnaires include: (1) whether students know all of the names of the English tenses; (2) whether students know how to use the English tenses in academic writing; (3) whether students make mistakes when using tenses in academic writing; and (4) whether students believe that mastering English tenses will improve their academic writing skills. In addition, the following qualitative questions were addressed via Google form: (1) which tenses the students find difficult to employ in academic writing; (2) the students' opinion on whether mastering English tenses may help them improve their writing ability. The Google form was used to collect research data since it is easier and faster to collect data than the manual or direct technique, as well as because of the corona virus (covid-19) outbreak.

The quantitative data analysis was carried out in a methodical manner using Google Forms. The outcomes were copied and pasted into the report. In the meantime, qualitative data analysis was guided on the basis of interactive data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Results

The study reveals three significant findings: descriptions of students' understanding of English tenses, students' challenges with English tenses, and students' view that mastering English vocabulary can help them enhance their academic writing skills.

### *The students' English tenses mastery*

Fitria (2020) and Rofik and Sahid (2019) emphasized the necessity of mastering English tenses in English writing. One sign that EFL students were aware with English tenses was that they were required to learn at least the 16 names of the tenses. According to this study, the majority of EFL students who took an academic writing class claimed to know all of the names of the English tenses, with 62.7 % (37 out of 59 respondents) claiming to know them all. However, around 28.8% of respondents admitted to being unable to memorize all of the names of the tenses. Surprisingly, about 8.5 % of the respondents (5 students) said they didn't remember all of the English tenses' names (see diagram 1). They were expected to learn at least some of the names of the English tenses as EFL students in the English Department. However, it's possible that a small percentage of respondents misunderstood the question and provided such responses.

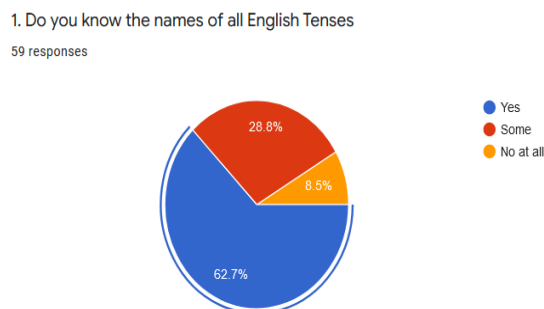


Diagram 1. The students' familiarity of English tenses

This research indicates that understanding English tenses is regarded as a barrier for EFL students' English writing ability. This is consistent with the findings of Harun and Abdullah (2020) in Malaysian primary school locations. According to the researchers, the most difficult challenge that EFL students had in English writing was the use of English tenses. Even the students were unfamiliar with the English tenses' names.

The second indication of the tenses mastery is the EFL students' competence to employ the English tenses in writing. As one part of English grammar, the tenses should be mastered by the students prior to the writing practice. The research

findings exposed that the most number of students were able to employ some of the tenses in writing. This group was represented by 54.2% respondents (32 out of 59 students). The number of students claimed that they know how to employ the English tenses in writing was around 33.9% of respondents (20 students). However, around 11.9% of respondents (7 students) revealed that they cannot employ the tenses at all in academic writing (as seen in diagram 2).

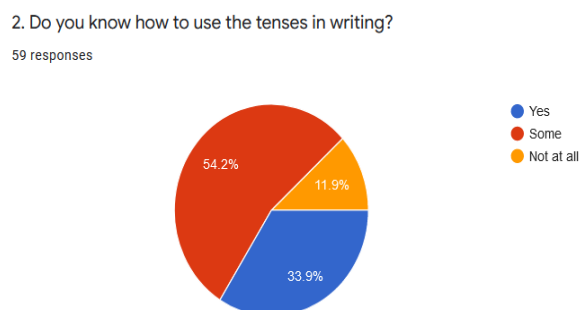


Diagram 2. students' ability to use English tenses

This remark was surprising, given that they are at least capable of writing in one or two tenses. Following clarification with the pupils, they clarified that the queries were misunderstood. They could write in a variety of tenses, including simple present and simple future.

This finding implies that the majority of students were unfamiliar with English tenses and how to use them effectively in academic writing. This appears to be the primary concern in nations where English is taught as a foreign language, such as Indonesia and other South East Asian countries (Pasaribu, 2021; Harun and Abdullah, 2020; Yunus *et al.*, 2018).

### ***The students' difficulties in using English tenses***

One of the language skills is the ability to write that the majority of EFL students struggle with (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). This is also evident in students' responses to the issue of whether they make errors in their academic writing practice when it comes to tense usage. Diagram 3 illustrates students' perceptions of grammatical faults in the use of tenses throughout academic writing practice. Around 55.9 % of students admitted to making errors in their use of English tenses during writing practice. The remaining students, 44.1 %, reported to have made fewer tenses errors while practicing academic writing.

3. Do you make mistakes or errors in using tenses in academic writing practice/task?

59 responses

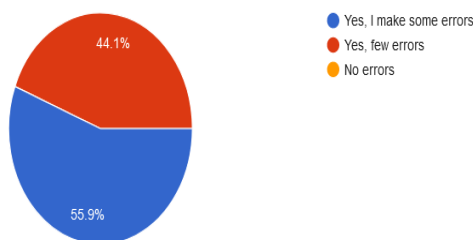


Diagram 3. The frequency of errors in using the English tenses

This finding corroborates the students' prior comments, indicating that the majority of students were unfamiliar with the names of the English tenses and their use in writing. The primary reason for EFL students' inability to apply English grammar, particularly English tenses, in writing practice may be a lack of students' English grammatical competence (Harun and Abdullah, 2020; Azizah and Budiman, 2017; Bada and Ulum, 2018; Heryanti, Sucipto and Makmur, 2017), particularly in the area of English tenses use (Fitria, 2020; Masruddin, 2019; Rofik and Sahid, 2019).

Further investigation is to expose the type of English tenses that the students were unfamiliar with and know how to use them in writing. The research data were obtained by interviewing them through Google form. The data analysis show interesting findings that most of the students were familiar with the simple tenses, however they found it difficult to practice the perfect tenses, and perfect continuous tenses. They struggled to use the tenses in academic writing. This findings indicate that the students practiced simple tenses, such as simple past, simple present, and simple future, more often in academic writing than other types of tenses. Therefore, they were more capable of using simple tenses in academic writing practice. Table 1 demonstrates the students' competence in using English tenses in writing.

Table 1. Students' Competence in Using English Tenses.

| No | Tenses  | N  | %     |
|----|---|----|-------|
| 1  | Simple Past, Present, Future Tenses             | 58 | 98.31 |
| 2  | Past, Present, Future Continuous Tenses         | 45 | 76.27 |
| 3  | Past, Present, Future Perfect Tenses            | 22 | 37.29 |
| 4  | Past, Present, Future Perfect Continuous Tenses | 4  | 6.78  |

The findings indicate that all pupils were familiar with the application of the simple tense such as simple present, simple past, and simple future (98.31%).

Moreover, the students were slightly uncomfortable with the past, present, and future continuous tenses (76.27%). However, they seem struggle to apply the past, present, and future perfect tenses (37.29%). Finally, only few students were familiar with the past, present, future perfect continuous tenses (6.78%). This conclusion indicated that the majority of students remained puzzled about how to employ tenses in their writing practice. As a result, the students need to focus more on how to use tenses in all of their practices. Jayanti (2019) also emphasized the need of proper tense usage in writing. Prior to the writing exercise in English, EFL students should demonstrate their understanding of English tenses.

The inability of certain EFL students to master English tenses was due to a variety of factors. Aziz, Fitriani and Amalina (2020) argued that the failure was mostly due to the dissimilar systematical concepts between the Indonesian and English languages in regarding conjugation factors. Heryanti, Sucipto and Makmur (2017) and Jayanti (2019) both emphasized the EFL students' lack of grammatical grasp of English tenses in application writing.

4. Do you think by mastering tenses you can improve your academic writing skills?

59 responses

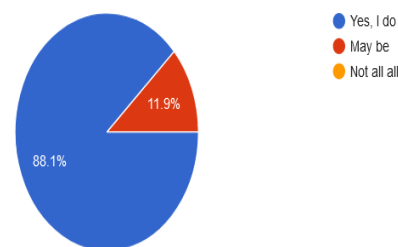


Diagram 4 the students' belief in English tenses mastery leads to the improvement of their academic writing skills.

The data indicate that most of the students considered that mastering English tenses was necessary for improving their writing abilities. Thus, prior to the writing practice, they must teach grammatical knowledge of English tenses.

This study addressed several essential concerns concerning EFL students' proficiency with the English tenses and their perspectives on the critical roles of the English tenses in academic writing. To begin, the majority of students were unfamiliar with the English tenses and how they were used in academic writing. This issue was presumed to have arisen as a result of the students' lack of English grammatical knowledge and the Indonesian language's differing concept of tenses. Thus, it is critical for EFL teachers or lecturers to provide answers to this difficulty prior to students engaging in writing practice.

The crucial function of English tenses in academic writing was also acknowledged by students as a necessary component of academic writing success. As a result, students' belief should improve as their proficiency with the English tenses improves.

### ***EFL students' belief in mastering English tenses can improve academic writing skills***

It is also necessary to expose the students' voices in their belief that knowing English tenses can help them improve their academic writing skills. According to the study's findings, 88.1 percent of respondents (52 students) stated that knowing English tenses was critical to improving their writing ability. However, approximately 11.9 percent of respondents (7 students) expressed reservations about the premise that mastering English tenses should result in an improvement in their academic writing ability. The data for this finding are depicted in Diagram 4.

### **Conclusion**

The research purpose was to ascertain EFL students' perspectives on their English tenses competence in academic writing practice and how English tenses mastery was perceived to be a critical component of students' writing skill improvement. The research revealed that most of students lacked basic knowledge of the English tenses and were unfamiliar with their use in academic writing. However, the majority of students agreed that mastering the English tenses would help them enhance their writing abilities.

The research findings have implications for English teaching practice, particularly in the area of academic writing instruction. Prior to the writing exercise, English teachers or lecturers should consider the vital importance of English tenses mastering for EFL students. Teachers must provide an effective technique for students to develop their proficiency in the use of the English tense in writing. For academics with an interest in English writing research, the research findings serve as a foundation for future investigation of the challenges.

Apart from the research's notable findings, it does have several limitations that should be addressed in future research. The sample size should be raised to ensure the correctness of the data analysis outcomes. More difficult qualitative questions must be addressed in order to elucidate the causes for students' inability to learn English tenses and their application in writing. Thus, further research on the application of English tenses in writing practice is yet productive to be examined quantitatively and qualitatively. The enormous amount of research data should be a primary issue for scholars interested in doing replicative research in the future.

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