

英語教學期刊摘要中現在式與過去式的使用— 國際期刊與本地期刊之比較

The Use of the Present and Past Tense in TESOL Journal Abstracts--- A Comparison between International and Local Journals

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摘要

本研究運用了兩種語料庫語言學常用的工具--Free CLAWS WWW trial service and WordSmith Tools—來探討國際英語教學期刊及本地英語教學期刊摘要中現在式與過去式的使用。

作者共收集了 60 篇國際英語教學期刊摘要及 40 篇本地英語教學期刊摘要來作分析。分析的結果則分成五部份來報告，分別是(一) 國際英語教學期刊摘要中常用現在式的動詞；(二) 國際英語教學期刊摘要中常用過去式的動詞；(三) 國際英語教學期刊摘要中現在式與過去式互見的動詞；(四) 本土英語教學期刊摘要中時式使用不一致的動詞；(五) 國際英語教學期刊摘要與本土英語教學期刊摘要中動詞的分配情形。

關鍵詞：語料庫語言學，英語教學期刊摘要，現在式，過去式

ABSTRACT

This study employed two commonly used tools in Corpus Linguistics—Free CLAWS WWW trial service and WordSmith Tools—to investigate the use of the present tense and past tense in international and local TESOL journal abstracts. 60 international abstracts and 40 local abstracts were collected for the analysis. The results were then categorized into five parts: (1) verbs mainly used in the present tense in the international corpus; (2) verbs mainly used in the past tense in the international corpus; (3) verbs interchangeably used in both tenses in the international corpus; (4) verbs inconsistently used in the local corpus and (5) verbs distribution in both corpora.

Key words: Corpus Linguistics, TESOL journal abstracts, presents tense, past tense

1. Introduction

The use of the present tense and past tense in academic abstracts is quite confusing to most L2 writers on the ground that there does not seem to be a clear distinction between the use of these two tenses.

In terms of distinguishing the use of the two tenses in academic abstracts, discourse analysis and other subfields of linguistics have not yet come to a satisfactory conclusion. The methodology used in corpus linguistics is therefore considered as an

alternative tool for such an investigation.

The present study is aimed to find possible patterns from a small corpus created by the author, in an attempt to answer the tense use question in such a genre.

In the following sections, previous studies will be reviewed first, followed by the methodology of this study. Then possible findings will be presented and discussed before a conclusion is made at the end of the paper.

2. Literature Review

The use of the present tense and past tense in academic journal abstracts has not yet been fully explored so far. Most of the previous studies tried to look at the problem from a discourse-based perspective. In a study on the past tense in English, Riddle (1986) proposed that the past tense tends to be used in the descriptions of experiments or empirical studies, because the focus in such contexts is on the completion in the past, carried with background information. For example,

*An experiment **was carried out** to determine whether.....*

Riddle further proposed that when reference is made to something that continues to exist in the present and has immediate current relevance, such as to the results of an experiment or to data being reported, then the information tends to belong to the foreground, and the present tense is usually preferred. For example,

*The results of this experiment **show** that.....*

Therefore, when it comes to abstract writing, the present tense is usually used, because it represents foregrounded information as an independent summary of the paper, as shown in the following example:

*The paper **demonstrates** that sound changes do not always affect the most frequent words first.*

However, McCarthy & Carter (1994) had a different claim from Riddle's in terms of abstract writing. They proposed that "all verbs in the abstract are simple past tense, except the concluding sentence,

which projects forward to future research." The genre they were referring to here is medical research articles in journals such as the *British Medical Journal*, with one example shown in the following:

*Factors contributing to differences in the prevalences of respiratory symptoms and diseases among ethnic groups **were studied** in primary school children living in 20 inner city areas of England in 1983. The raised prevalences of respiratory symptoms in these groups **were compared** with results from.....*

*Respiratory illness **was found** to vary in prevalence among ethnic groups but may be perceived differently by different groups. Further studies, measuring lung function, **are necessary**.*

What McCarthy & Carter (1994) and McCarthy (1991) were concerned is the predictable relationships between grammar and genre, such as patterns of tense and aspect observed in scientific genres. In a similar vein, Swales (1981; 1985; 1990) also showed that many academic texts have regular patterns at the level of discourse in their introductory sections. Nevertheless, these studies only touched upon scientific genres and neglected other disciplines.

As an L2 writer in the TESOL field, I think it would be useful to investigate the tense used in academic writing in our own discipline due to the following reasons: First, compared to other full-fledged disciplines in science, TESOL is still a young and growing field, and the genre of its academic journal articles has not yet been "conventionalized." Therefore, it would be worth noticing if there are any patterns in this genre in terms of grammatical choice. Second, such findings would benefit L2 writers in the TESOL field when they come across problems with the choice of tense or other grammatical items in their academic writing.

The present study, as mentioned in the

Introduction section, is thus aimed at the use of the present and past tense in TESOL journal abstracts. A corpus-based methodology is used for the following investigation.

3. Method

3.1 Corpus Collection

The present study focuses on academic journal abstracts of empirical studies in the TESOL field only. Two corpora were collected by the author—(1) abstracts from internationally-renowned TESOL journals (International Corpus), as shown in Table 1, and (2) abstracts from local TESOL journals (Local

Corpus) here in Taiwan, as shown in Table 2. Table 3 shows the text information of both corpora.

3.2 Tools

Two main tools were used in the investigation:

- (1) Free CLAWS WWW trial service: which offers access to the latest version of the tagger, CLAWS4, as set up by Lancaster University, UK, to tag the text.
- (2) WordSmith Tools (Version 3.0): which is a software designed by Mike Scott at University of Liverpool, consisting of three main functions—*Concord*, *WordList* and *Keywords*.

Table 1. International Journals

<i>TESOL Quarterly</i>	<i>Language Learning</i>	<i>Language Testing</i>	<i>Modern Language Journal</i>	Total number of Abstracts
10	2	12	36	60

Table 2. Local Journals

<i>英語教學 Language Teaching and Learning-----NTNU</i>	<i>英語語言與文學學刊 Studies in English Language and Literature---NTSTU</i>	Total number of Abstracts
22	18	40

Table 3. Text Information

	Token	Type	Type-token ratio	Sentence number	Sentence length
International	10350	2145	20.72	369	25.75
Local	6783	1525	22.48	253	22.38

3.3 Procedure

First, all the electronic files of the 100 abstracts were converted into text files after being collected.

Second, each abstract (the text file) was sent to the Free CLAWS WWW trial service to be tagged.

Next, the WordSmith Tools were used to locate all the *present* and *past tense verbs* in each corpus, as defined in Table 4.

The verbs being investigated in the study excluded all the *be* verbs (*is, am, are, was, were*) used as main verbs, because the *be* verbs are undoubtedly

the most commonly used verbs in all texts, and the inclusion of such verbs does not seem to be of much interest to most L2 writers. As a result, the present study focuses on *lexical verbs* in the present and past tense, to the exclusion of the *be* verbs.

Finally, the data obtained from the above procedures were analyzed and will be discussed in the next section.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 5 and Table 6 show the top ten present tense verbs and top ten past tense verbs used in both the International Corpus and the Local Corpus. The following results and discussions will be based mainly on these two tables.

Table 4. The *present* and *past tense verbs* investigated in the present study

Tense	Grammatical Categorization	Examples	Annotations
Present Tense	3 rd person singular	<i>This article examines ...</i>	VVZ
	1 st person singular	<i>I examine a subset ...</i>	VVB
	plural	<i>Findings indicate ...</i>	VVB
	negation	<i>...who do/does not share ...</i>	VDB
	have (lexical verb)	<i>Findings have important implications ...</i>	VHB
	has (lexical verb)	<i>Convention has an effect ...</i>	VHZ
	passive voice	<i>...expert help is neededscores are presented ...</i>	VBZ+VVN VBB+VVN
Past Tense	declarative	<i>This study examined ...</i>	VVD
	negation	<i>...gender did not have an effect.</i>	VDD
	had (lexical verb)	<i>...raters had some difficulty ...</i>	VHD
	passive voice	<i>...who was/were not known ...</i>	VBD+VNN

Table 5. Top 10 *present* tense verbs used in both corpora

International					Local				
Rank	Verb	F.P.W.	R.F.	%	Rank	Verb	F.P.W.	R.F.	%
1.	<i>suggest</i>	1.55	16	4.7%	1	<i>suggest</i>	1.47	10 (3)	3.8%
2.	<i>present</i>	0.87	9 (2)	2.6%		<i>use</i>	1.47	10 (5)	3.8%
	<i>report</i>	0.87	9 (1)	2.6%	2.	<i>discuss</i>	1.32	9 (6)	3.4%
	<i>discuss</i>	0.87	9 (8)	2.6%	3.	<i>investigate</i>	1.18	8	3.1%
3.	<i>need</i>	0.68	7 (1)	2.0%	4.	<i>indicate</i>	1.03	7	2.7%
4.	<i>exist</i>	0.58	6	1.7%	5.	<i>have/has</i>	0.88	6	2.3%
	<i>explore</i>	0.58	6	1.7%		<i>provide</i>	0.88	6	2.3%
5.	<i>examine</i>	0.48	5 (1)	1.5%	6.	<i>show</i>	0.74	5	1.9%
	<i>include</i>	0.48	5 (1)	1.5%	7.	<i>aim</i>	0.59	4	1.5%
	<i>reveal</i>	0.48	5	1.5%		<i>learn</i>	0.59	4	1.5%

	<i>show</i>	0.48	5	1.5%	8.	<i>tend</i>	0.44	3	1.1%
	<i>use</i>	0.48	5 (5)	1.5%					
6.	<i>indicate</i>	0.39	4	1.2%					

()-----The number in the parentheses indicates the number of occurrences of passive voice.

F.P.W.---Frequency Per 1000 Words

R.F.-----Raw Frequency

%-----% of the overall present tense verbs used

Table 6. Top 10 *past* tense verbs used in both corpora

International					Local				
Rank	Verb	F.P.W.	R.F.	%	Rank	Verb	F.P.W.	R.F.	%
1.	<i>used</i>	0.97	10 (6)	3.1%	1.	<i>investigated</i>	1.47	10 (2)	5.7%
2.	<i>found</i>	0.87	9 (4)	2.8%	2.	<i>used</i>	1.33	9 (8)	5.2%
3.	<i>examined</i>	0.77	8 (2)	2.5%	3.	<i>found</i>	1.03	7 (7)	4.0%
	<i>had</i>	0.77	8	2.5%	4.	<i>gave</i>	0.88	6 (6)	3.4%
	<i>indicated</i>	0.77	8	2.5%		<i>showed</i>	0.88	6	3.4%
	<i>revealed</i>	0.77	8	2.5%	5.	<i>asked</i>	0.74	5 (5)	2.9%
	<i>showed</i>	0.77	8 (1)	2.5%		<i>had</i>	0.74	5	2.9%
4.	<i>included</i>	0.68	7	2.2%	6.	<i>indicated</i>	0.60	4	2.3%
	<i>investigated</i>	0.68	7	2.2%		<i>included</i>	0.60	4	2.3%
5.	<i>received</i>	0.48	5	1.6%		<i>participated</i>	0.60	4	2.3%

()-----The number in the parentheses indicates the number of occurrences of passive voice.

F.P.W.---Frequency Per 1000 Words

R.F.-----Raw Frequency

%-----% of the overall past tense verbs used

4.1 Verbs mainly used in the present tense in the International Corpus

In terms of the International Corpus, the present tense verbs that are shown only in Table 5 but not in Table 6 (i.e. verbs that are not normally interchangeably used in both tenses) include the following:

suggest, present, report, discuss, need, exist, explore

Of the seven verbs listed above, *need* and *exist*

never appear as past tense verbs in the International Corpus, while the other five verbs (*suggest, present, report, discuss, explore*) appear mainly as the present tense verbs and rarely appear in the past tense with only one or two occurrences in the International Corpus.

In terms of the Local Corpus, *suggest* and *discuss* are also included in the top ten present tense verbs, which are the only two verbs that are consistently used in both corpora in this sense.

It is found in the International Corpus that, in most cases, the five verbs (*suggest, present, report,*

discuss, explore) are associated with subjects such as *this article, this paper, this study, the findings, results* and so on in a similar sense to Riddle's (1986) argument that the present tense is usually used to represent foregrounded information as an independent summary of the paper.

As for *need* and *exist*, they only appear in the present tense in the International Corpus, because the contexts in which these verbs usually appear tend to continue to exist in the present and need to be foregrounded. For examples, these two verbs can be found in sentences like:

This article argues that teachers need to address questions of.....

Relatively little research exists on the nature of mainstream....

These two verbs, as well as *present, report* and *explore* were not frequently found in the Local Corpus in this study, which seem to reveal the difference between international and local writers in their choice of certain verbs.

4.2 Verbs mainly used in the past tense in the International Corpus

In terms of the International Corpus, the past tense verbs that appear only in Table 5 but not in Table 6 (i.e. verbs that are not normally interchangeably used in both tenses) include the following:

found, had, investigated, received

These four verbs appear mainly in the past tense but also appear once or twice in the present tense in the International Corpus.

In terms of the Local Corpus, the first three of

the above four verbs (*found, had, investigated*) are also included in the top ten past tense verbs, which are the only three verbs that are consistently used in both corpora in this sense.

For these four past tense verbs frequently found in the International Corpus, there is not a tendency to associate them to certain subjects except the verb *investigated*, which is often associated with the subject *this study* (5 occurrences). Examples are shown as follows:

The earlier study found that...../ Significant differences were found...

Respondents had 15.5 year of .../...raters had some difficulty...

The study investigated.....

The learners received less modified input.../..the other received the self-selected reading.....

One common feature among the verbs listed above is that they all indicate the completion of a certain action in the past, therefore the past tense is used to show the background information, as argued by Riddle (1986).

4.3 Verbs interchangeably used in both tenses in the International Corpus

In Tables 5 and 6, the following six verbs are found to be frequently and interchangeably used in both tenses in the International Corpus:

use, examine, indicate, reveal, show, include

In other words, the above verbs are almost equally used in both the present and past tense by

international writers. However, of the six verbs mentioned here, only *use*, *indicate* and *show* also appear in the top ten list in the Local Corpus and are used interchangeably in both tenses. Another inconsistent use is the interchangeable use of *have/has* and *had* in the Local Corpus, which was not found in the International Corpus.

The examples shown below reveal the difficulty in generalizing a rule for the six verbs listed above. In most cases, these verbs do not show consistent use of tense even with exactly the same subjects:

*...scale-level methods **are** sometimes exclusively used to measure...*

*Feedback **was** seldom used in content exchanges and never in ...*

*This study **examines** the effects of video.....*

*This study **examined** whether exposure to second language....*

*The results **indicate** that item-level DIF....*

*The results **indicated** significantly greater cued-recording.....*

*The findings **reveal** comparatively low levels of LI use....*

*The findings **revealed** that students who study spoken....*

*The article **shows** how two girls differentially engage in disputes...*

*The study **showed** the complex effects of item characteristics...*

*These aspects **include**: the misalignment of academic....*

*Problematic aspects **included** surface errors, parochialism,....*

The backgrounding / foregrounding principle proposed by Riddle does not seem to work here, because the use of these verbs in either tense is actually quite arbitrary without any observable patterns. In other words, international writers, as well as local writers, use certain verbs inconsistently in the present and past tense.

4.4 Verbs inconsistently used in the Local Corpus

(1) *investigate*

In the Local Corpus, the use of the verb *investigate* was found to deviate from the pattern found in the International Corpus. As previously discussed, the verb *investigate* was mainly used in the past tense by the international writers (7 occurrences), with only two occurrences in the present tense (not shown in the tables). However, in the Local Corpus, the verb *investigate* was heavily used in both tenses (8 occurrences in the present tense and 10 occurrences in the past tense). This means, when it comes to the verb *investigate*, international writers tend to use the past tense and view it as a complete action, while local writers do not seem to have a consistent tense use of this verb. The deviation of local writers' use of *investigate* may come from its frequent association with the subject *this study* (12 occurrences) or other subjects of this sort, which tends to induce a sense of summarizing the paper as in *this study suggests* or *this paper discusses*. Some local writers just mistakenly foregrounded the information with the present tense *investigate*.

(2) *gave* and *asked*

Another deviating examples found in the Local Corpus are the use of the past tense verbs *gave* and *asked*. It is interesting to find that these two verbs were used frequently and exclusively in the passive voice (*was/were given/asked*) in the Local Corpus, while the verbs were rarely used in the International Corpus (*gave*: 2 occurrences; *asked*: 0 occurrence) and were used in the active voice only.

For example, international writers tend to use these two verbs like the following:

They gave and received the training.....

Learning gave learners something that.....

Local writers, on the other hand, prefer to use these two verbs as in:

Subjects/Children/Groups were given the treatment.....

They were asked to read one passage.....

As McCarthy & Carter (1994) mentioned, *voice* in the verb is also highly patterned in terms of genre. According to their findings, passive voice is prevalent in the Introduction section of scientific genres, because passive voice has been seen as a marker of informality at interpersonal level.

However, the results of this study seem to be contradictory to McCarthy and Carter’s claim in that the verbs *gave* and *asked* were exclusively active in the International Corpus, though exclusively passive in the Local Corpus. These results indicate that local writers of TESOL tend to be as informal as writers of other scientific genres at the interpersonal level, while their international counterparts do not, at least in the use of these two verbs.

Table 7. Verb Distribution in Both Corpora

	International Corpus		Local Corpus	
All verbs	1493		1125	
Present Tense Vs	343	22.97%	262	23.29%
Past Tense Vs	320	21.43%	174	15.47%

% ---% of the overall verbs used in each corpus

4.5 Verbs Distribution in Both Corpora

In addition to Tables 5 and 6, verb distribution in both corpora was also investigated. As is shown in Table 7, the percentages of both tenses used in the International Corpus are 22.97% and 21.43 % respectively, which are approximately the same proportions. However, 23.29% of the verbs used in the Local Corpus are in the present tense and only

15.47% are past tense verbs. This seems to imply that local writers tend to use past tense verbs less often than international writers.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the present and past tense used in international and local TESOL journal abstracts. The results show that for some verbs

investigated in the study, Riddle's arguments on tense used as backgrounding and foregrounding devices are applicable, with the former employing the past tense and the latter the present tense. However, for some other verbs, Riddle's principle is unable to explain the arbitrary use of tense by both international and local writers.

Also, unlike other scientific genres, such as the medical research articles in journals mentioned in McCarthy & Carter (1994), TESOL journal abstracts have not yet reached a conventionalized relationship between grammar and text organization at least in terms of the use of tense. For future studies on this track, there are a few suggestions as follows:

First, it is suggested that the corpora could be enlarged to achieve more reliable results since the corpora used in the present study are only small ones.

Second, grammatical items other than tense are also worth exploring, because certain relationships might be unveiled between grammar and this genre of TESOL journal abstracts in further studies.

Third, in addition to abstract writing, one might also want to look at the possible patterns in other sections, such as Introduction, Results and Discussion and Conclusion, in TESOL papers. It is plausible to expect an overall structure of academic writing in this field from such investigations.

Finally, further investigations might also be done on academic writing in other disciplines in addition to TESOL or scientific genres. Possible findings could be used to verify results from previous studies or reconstruct the structure of academic writing across disciplines.

Generally speaking, corpus linguistics has already shed some light on the research of text analysis across various genres. More efforts and time are encouraged for studies of this kind in the future.

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