



The Use of the Literary Present Tense in Literary Analyses Written by Undergraduates of English Literature in Sri Lanka: An Error Analysis

¹Achala K. Dissanayake

¹English Language Teaching Unit, Faculty of Humanities and Sciences,
Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), Malabe, Sri Lanka
Corresponding Author* - achala.d@sliit.lk

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ABSTRACT

In literary analyses, the literary present tense is used to discuss certain events that take place in literary works. In other words, in literary analyses, writers sometimes use the present tense in reference to works of literature written in the past. Literature students for whom English is a second language can find it daunting to grasp the concept of using the simple present to discuss past events. Apart from this confusion, undergraduate students of English literature can face difficulty in distinguishing between the creative and academic writing styles, especially as they are exposed to both styles of writing and are expected to write academically about creative writing. Against this backdrop, this study analyzed errors related to the use of present tense that occurred in academic writing samples of 21 undergraduate students studying English literature at a Sri Lankan non-state higher education institute. The causes of these errors too were determined. The error analysis was conducted according to the five steps suggested by S. Pit Corder (1967). A total of 32 present tense-related errors were identified. Of them, 12 were instances of when the literary present tense was not used where necessary. The remaining 20 errors were examples of students' usage of the simple present tense instead of the simple past. These two types of errors indicate

that the students lack knowledge and/ or practice in determining when (and when not) to use the literary present tense in their literary analyses. Furthermore, a reporting sentence which could be written in either the simple present or simple past tense was identified; such reporting sentences can be construed as increasing the difficulty that students would face in the selection of tenses. Therefore, it can be concluded that literature undergraduates should be introduced to the concept of the literary present tense, which is not a term that is frequently discussed in books written about the pedagogy of academic writing, according to the researcher's knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION

The literary present tense, also known as the "timeless present tense," is used in several scenarios including when focusing on the "present existence of works created in the past." An example of the usage of the literary present tense in reference to English literature is the sentence "Describing individuals coping with ordinary life and social pressures, she [Jane Austen] uses a sharp satiric wit to expose follies, hypocrisies and false truths" (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, pp. 129-130). The use of this tense is common and necessary in literary analyses, where undergraduates of literature use the present tense to comment on literary works created in the past. English literature undergraduates for whom English is a second language (e.g., English literature undergraduates in Sri Lanka) could find the use of the literary present confusing as it essentially comments on a text written in the past, in the present tense.

Apart from the confusion surrounding the use of the literary present tense, these students also have difficulty in distinguishing between the academic and creative writing styles. This is primarily because, unlike students studying subjects such as engineering and logistics, English literature students are exposed to both the creative and academic writing styles and are expected to

write about creative texts academically. The fact that they are engaged in reading creative writing and are expected to write academically can be challenging especially for the students for whom English is not a first language.

Many researchers have focused on undergraduate academic writing errors in both Sri Lankan and international contexts (Abeywickrama, 2010; Amiri & Puteh, 2017; Atmaca, 2016; Dissanayake & Dissanayake, 2019; Erkaya, 2012; Jayasundara & Premarathna 2011; Mohammed, 2015; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Walkova, 2014; Wella Arachchi, 2016). These studies analyze writing samples of literature undergraduates for whom English is either a second language or a foreign language. However, according to the researcher's knowledge, only a few exist that focus on errors made by literature undergraduates in their literary analyses (Demirel, 2017; Sermsook et al., 2017; Uzun, 2018). These studies do not focus on the differences between the academic and creative writing styles, and how the influence of the creative writing style may be reflected in the academic writing of literature undergraduates. Neither do the studies focus explicitly on the students' use of the literary present and any errors the students might have committed in this regard. This points to the fact that any confusion literature undergraduates may face in distinguishing the creative writing style from the academic writing style has been overlooked.

To address this niche, this study focused on tense-related errors identified in the academic writing samples of undergraduate students studying English literature in a Sri Lankan non-state higher educational institute.

It is expected that an analysis of the errors in literary analyses of literature undergraduates would assist teachers and lecturers of English language and literature to guide their students towards using the literary present tense accurately and understand the differences between what

constitutes a grammatical sentence in the academic and creative writing styles.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted Corder’s (1967) five steps of error analysis – collecting data, and then identifying, describing, explaining and evaluating errors found in the samples collected.

Language samples were collected from a batch of 21 undergraduate students studying English Literature at a non-state higher education institute. This sample can be described as specific as the number of learners is limited and does not represent all the literature undergraduates of Sri Lanka. Two language samples were collected from each student. The first sample comprised an answer written by the students at an in-class test. The duration of this test was 1.5 hours and was a formative assessment. A summative assessment was used as the second sample. In other words, answers written by the same students to one question of a mid-semester examination paper was focused on. The duration was 30 minutes. (A total of three questions had to be answered by the students in 1.5 hours. The number of minutes spent by the students on answering this question can only be guessed).

This research also employed an instrument which was administered to the students at the time of sample collection. It consisted of details regarding the participants’ language and educational backgrounds.

The two sets of writing samples were carefully read through, and each verb-related error was entered into a Microsoft Excel sheet. The erroneous sentences were recorded under each student’s registration number, which were written by the students on their answer scripts.

Once all the identified errors had been gathered onto one Excel sheet, the constructions were carefully re-read and the types of errors were noted down.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The tense-related errors identified were connected to the use of simple present tense and simple past tense. In 12 instances, the students had not used the literary present tense where necessary. In 20 instances, the simple present tense had been used instead of the simple past. These errors are worthy of attention as they indicate a confusion among students regarding the use of the literary present tense in the literary analyses.

3.1 Absence of the literary present tense

Given below is one of the instances in which the literary present tense was not used where needed. (This sentence is about Alfreda de Silva’s poem “Letter from a Schoolroom”. The pronoun “she” stands for the poetess.)

Original sentence	Corrected sentence
1. <i>But she mentioned that there is a new school building near to them for this village.*</i>	But she mentions/ has mentioned that there is a new school building in the village.

In this sentence, the student attempts to report and paraphrase what the poet Alfreda de Silva attempts to express in the poem. In fact, this sentence paraphrases the idea expressed through the lines “We’re free to take our classes out-of-doors or anywhere/ till the new school, now growing next door, will be our new home” in the poem “Letter from a Schoolroom.” Apart from paraphrasing this idea, the student also reports what the poet has stated in the poem. The literary present is more appropriate in this sentence since the present tense indicates the immediacy of the poem. Although the poem itself was written in the past, the readers of the poem engage with it and interpret it in the present moment. In addition, this sentence is an example of a student’s attempt

to paraphrase and report information. The present tense is appropriate in “citations and paraphrases of information,” and the “presentation of general facts, opinions or research findings” (Hinkel, 2004, p. 146). Therefore, in this instance, the literary present tense is more appropriate than the past tense.

3.2 Simple present tense instead of the simple past tense

Apart from the absence of the literary present tense, there were 20 sentences in which the present tense was used instead of the simple past. Given below are some examples.

Original sentence	Corrected sentence
2. <i>Richard's life is compare to a short summer because he dies in his middle ages.*</i>	Richard de Soyza's life is compared to a short summer because he died in his middle age.
3. <i>The poem is written by teacher of his children in a first person.*</i>	The poem was written by a teacher about her students in first person.

In the corrected sentences above, the past tense is more appropriate than the present tense. This is because they refer to incidents that are past occurrences within the poem. For example, in Sentence 2 the use of the verb “die” in the past tense is erroneous as the death of Richard de Zoysa occurred before the poem was written; the poem “Lines for Richard” was written by Alfreda de Silva as a eulogy. Therefore, within the poem, the death of de Zoysa is a past incident and therefore cannot be written in the present tense. Furthermore, in Sentence 3, the use of the verb “write” in the present tense passive voice is inappropriate since the poem “Letter from a Schoolroom” has already been written by Alfreda de Silva. The act of composing the poem is over. Therefore, the verb “write” should have been used in the past tense.

In effect, when students refer to the poem in their literary analyses and paraphrase the ideas in the poems, they are essentially referring to past

actions and reporting them to the reader. Thus, the sentences given above can be construed as reported speech, and the rules of reported speech should apply in these instances. Accordingly, the verbs, which are in present tense in the poem, should be written in the past tense in literary analyses. Thus, the above sentences show that the literary present tense does not have to be used all the time in literary analyses.

What can be elicited from the above analysis is that the students, while writing their analyses, have faced difficulties in deciding which tense to use in each of the situations elaborated above. Although they display knowledge about the literary present, they have not used it where needed or they have used it where unnecessary. This highlights the students’ confusion about where to use the literary present and where not to.

3.3 Reporting sentences that accept both present and past tenses

The students’ confusion with regard to the contexts in which the literary present should be used can be further exacerbated by sentences which can be written in both the present and the past tenses. An example of such an instance is given below:

Original Sentence	Corrected Sentence
4. <i>If its raining heavily, they came into the classroom and drawn bamboo tats and close the door and lights the kerosene lamps and they trying to imagine that they are in a sea and they like the drunken sailors in a rough sea and they singing like the sailors.*</i>	Present tense: Each time it rains, they come into the classroom, draw bamboo tats, close the door and light the kerosene lamps. Then they try to imagine that they are at sea and, like the drunken sailors in a rough sea, they sing.

	<p>Past tense: Each time it rained, they came into the classroom, drew bamboo tats, closed the door and lit the kerosene lamps. Then they tried to imagine that they were at sea and, like the drunken sailors in a rough sea, they sang.</p>
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This sentence highlights the confusion the students have faced in the use of tenses. In this run-on sentence, the student has tried to rephrase eight lines which form an entire stanza in the poem. These lines are:

Sometimes rain drives us in. We draw bamboo tats,
 close the doors against the storm, light kerosene lamps
 and listen to the wind tear the garden tress like ancient silk.

Our faces swinging in lamplight, we're drunken sailors
 caught in a barbarous sea. We switch our history lesson for
 poetry
 and listen to sea shanties and sea poems,
 dreaming of the sun and a safe haven.

The confusion that the student has faced in Sentence 4 stems directly from the fact that in this particular instance, the sentence can be written in either the present or the past tense. Where this poem is concerned, the past tense is more appropriate as the student is in fact reporting to the reader of the essay what the poetess has stated in the poem "Letter from a Schoolroom." The poem is, as the title suggests, a letter written by a teacher to her friend. So, when students describe to the readers of their essays what the teacher has told her friend, they [the students]

have to use reported speech. According to the rules of reported speech, students would have to convert the simple present tense into the simple past tense, in this particular instance. So, the tense errors committed in this sentence can be attributed to the student's confusion with the rules of using the literary present and the rules of reported speech. As a result, the student has failed to maintain parallelism throughout the sentence.

4. CONCLUSION

Via this error analysis, 32 tense-related errors were identified. Out of these 32 errors, the literary present tense was absent in 12 instances; instead, the simple past tense was used. The literary present tense is used in literary analyses with reference to the literary texts analyzed. Although literary texts were written in the past, each time they are read and analyzed, the events described therein unfold in the readers' minds. Therefore, literary texts are enjoyed in the present and the texts exist in the present. Due to this fact, in literary analyses, the texts can be referred to in the present tense. This, however, depends on the context.

The remaining 20 tense-related errors were caused due to the students having used the simple present tense instead of the simple past tense. These errors denote the students' lack of knowledge and/ or practice with regard to determining when (and when not) to use the literary present tense in their literary analyses. Therefore, the tense-related errors identified in the samples were paid much attention, as it could be argued that students of English literature are prone to making these types of errors in their literary analyses.

Adding to the confusion students might face when determining whether to use the literary present tense or not, there are instances when a sentence can be written either in the present tense or the past tense, depending on the context.

Therefore, where tense is concerned, such students have to be introduced to the concept of

the literary present tense, which is not a term that is frequently discussed in books written about the pedagogy of academic writing, according to the researcher's knowledge.

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