



A Call for Revising the Perfect Tenses Content in the EFL Course Books

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how consistent the Arabic EFL speakers are in using the perfect tenses -Present Perfect and Past Perfect, especially the public figures of relatively decent level of English language proficiency. The paper hypothesizes that, the perfect tenses are particularly challenging for the EFL learners in general compared to the past simple, as well as they distinguish native English speakers from bilinguals. The study uses an observation instrument of viewing 8 hours conversations from TV channels' YouTube facets involving 82 past tense situations for tracking the participant's proper use of the perfect tenses. The study concluded that a great deal of the Arab EFL speakers either miss properly using or avoiding English present and past perfect tenses in both of their formal and informal contexts of conversations. However, whether or not it is due to the grammar difference between the languages; Arabic only one past vs. English 3 pasts, cannot be confirmed for two reasons. In addition, the paper extends a recommendation based on the implications of the conclusion.

Keywords: Perfect tenses, Arabic EFL speakers, Native English speakers

INTRODUCTION

Background

Arabic language differs from English language in all the branches of linguistics including the tenses. It is simply because Arabic and English belong to two different families of languages; the first is Semite while the second is a hybrid made up of a group of Germanic languages (Dajani & Omari, 2013). Therefore, what is called sisters of Arabic language is such as the Hebrew language of the people from Israel, which those which are sisters to English include Scandinavian languages which are actually the origin of English. On the other hand there are hardly any languages that do not share roots with other languages. The sister languages Arabic and Hebrew share a lot of linguistic features even though Arabic has more complex grammar. On the other hand, Arabic and English are described as "distant languages" that have more differences between them than similarities; alphabets, large portion of phonetics, morphology, and several other differences. As far as Arabic

and English are concerned therefore, they differ in almost all the four branches of grammar, morphology, phonetics, semantics and syntax. The main reason behind this huge difference aside from the roots of the two, is the hybrid English versus the pure Arabic which did not borrow much from other languages.

Problem statement

The article titled, “Students doubt the usefulness of the Present Perfect tenses,” is indicative of how problematic the two perfect tenses are for EFL learners especially the poster is from the relevant platform English Language Learners (ELL, 2022). The article poster even went further as to say, “I’ve got the same questions from different students recently”. Now that the Arabic speaking population of ESL learners whose language has got only one past, learning and using English language’s 3 pasts must be of a challenge. It is even an extra challenge besides this linguistic one, which having an overall low level of English proficiency as well as low degree of exposure to English communication environment.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this paper is to call attention to what the researchers deem as unbalanced grammar content of the EFL course books for the Arabic speaking EFL learners that allocate the perfect tenses -Present Perfect and Past Perfect, equally with the other 4 tenses. For highlighting this imbalance, the study takes a sample of Arabic EFL speakers’ case of using/misusing the perfect tenses. This includes investigating how consistent the speakers who relatively enjoy a decent English language proficiency, are in using the two perfect tenses; why they could be use/misuse them; as well as whether or not the pattern of their use/misuse has linguistic reasons.

Research questions:

- Is the use of the 2 perfect tenses associated with the EFL speakers’ level of proficiency?
- Do the native English speakers confuse/misuse the 2 perfect tenses with past simple, too?
- Does Arabic language’s one-past tense structure has any effect on the speakers’ use of English’s 2 perfect tenses?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whether or not native English speakers confuse the perfect tenses with past simple, is a subject that has its share in the literature. A lot of native English Americans don’t bother using the past perfect tense in particular, even it is the most appropriate situation according to Lee & Senneff (2009). According to the article even some speakers in the US won’t use the past perfect anymore unless it’s really necessary. While according to Betty (1989), the British use the past perfect tense more often compared to their American counterparts who tend to express all past events in past simple. Why this tense deduction among the native UK and US speakers, Al-Kadi & Listyani (2022) claim they tend to use plain past tense because they find it convenient for conveying what they mean. Vice versa, the situations where the native UK and US speakers tend to or obliged to correctly use the perfect tenses according to, is in formal writing rather than in speaking; whether formal or informal situations. A more linguistic explanation comes from Kashmiri (2020) stating that, the perfect aspect in general are advanced and complex compared to the others including the past simple. Yet, there are instances where the perfect tenses represent a challenge for the native UK and US students, especially in the exams. According to Zween (1986), while it is rare for a native English student to mistake the present perfect and the past simple tenses, exam sentences are more apt for teachers to make them complex enough to confuse them with past simple tense.

The one-past vs. 3 pasts grammar structure that distant English language from Arabic language and vice versa, is a key area of difficulty for the Arabic speaking EFL learners according to Dajani & Omari (2013). In Arabic language the tenses are only two –the third is a rather a verb mode than tense, and the past tense conforms to that of English in indicating an action that took part sometime in the past. A slight difference in the two languages' past, is not by Mohammeda (2019) to be action in English's "and completed" piece of which is not part of Arabic definition of the past simple tense. This same bit of detail is taken by Siddiek Ali., & Nauman (2018) to be the reason why the Arabic speaking EFL learners find difficulty understudying the Present Perfect and Past Perfect tenses. In Arabic language therefore, expressing two actions that took place in the past, with the later ending the earlier, there are no additional modifiers included in the sentence. They still remain two past sentences separated with articles such as: then, and, until, etc. (Alaraj, 2016). The same applies to the Present Perfect tense for the Arabic speaking EFL learners. According to Omari (2013) some of them perceive it even as "weird" starting from its "deceptive" name "present" when it is a past tense. A more linguistic explanation comes from Elbashir (2023) stating that, bilingual Arabic speaking teachers find hard time explaining to the EFL learners that the Present Perfect tense expresses an action that happened in the past, BUT has a present influence or significance. Example of similar confusing sentences is given and analyzed by Mohammeda (2019) in the two sentences:

Sentence A: "He made a bad choice because he didn't check it first".

Sentence B: "He made a bad choice because he hadn't checked it first".

From the two sentences above, there is an implied reference point other than the present- having it checked- but no indication that making *bad choice* has anything to do with that, so both are simple past. However, someone were to say "Didn't you know you needed to check it carefully? Then one might respond with "Yes, and I had already check it carefully." "Had checked", in past perfect, since it is pragmatically relevant to another event that happened later but still in the past. Saying "Yes, and I had already checked " would seem strange, because it sounds like he is saying you got it before now, but not necessarily before you had to it . Therefore depending on what the context is, one would probably be understood even though he it sounds he/she wrong.

METHOD

The method adopted in this study is a qualitative technique using the instrument of curated English videoed conversations and sheets for recording the participants' ongoing behavior in a natural situation by the researches. The curated English videoed conversations are searched and viewed at formal TV satellite channels' YouTube data base of programs and themes.

Data collection

First, the researchers outlined a short list of the TV programs and themes that are likely to involve more past situations/contexts in order to make the observation process more focused. The researchers have reached to the target short list including:

- Memoir/ biography, narration shows
- Social/family talk shows
- Interviews, personal experience
- Islamic topics
- News commentary, analysis

The researchers' prior awareness of certain TV programs and public speakers, also made it easier to short-list the target conversations.

Participants

The participants are native Arabic speakers who are engaged in English conversations. The participants are taking part in YouTube channels of formal TV satellite channels rather than Social Media's informal platforms. This selective formal TV satellite channels manner was as well to ensure as much formal English conversations as possible. In some cases the participants are the hosts of the shows, in some they are the quests and in other cases they are both the hosts and the guests. The participants are addressing a limited Arabic speaking audience who are interested in English talk shows. at total 18 hours of conversation video clips were viewed for 14 days, and the data extracted in a written format.

Analysis

The analysis is conducted mainly by sorting out the occurrence of the incorrect use of the perfect tenses. For reference purpose, the correct uses of the perfect tenses are also included besides the past simple correct use. Finally, the findings from the reviewed literature are used and interpreting the data obtained.

RESULTS

The 14 days of observation by the researchers during which they viewed 8 hours of conversation video clips in different contexts, all of them included 82 situations where either of the 3 past tenses had to be used. The collected observation data is given in Table (2) below:

Table 2. The Uses of 3 Tenses

Tense Use	Occurrence	% of Incorrect
○ Past Simple ↔ Present Perfect inversion	40	48.78
○ Past Simple ↔ Past Perfect inversion	34	41.46
○ Correct perfect tenses use	8	9.75
○ Correct Simple Past use	0	0%

A quick look at Table (2) above, is the “exception which proves the rule” represented in the occurrence of correct use of the perfect tenses collecting 9.75 out of the total 82 situations where either of the 3 past tenses had to be used. Other than this exception, there is no surprise so far as the inversion (misuse) cases of the perfect tenses; namely, Past Simple instead of Present Perfect at 48.78 misuse; Past Simple instead of Past Perfect inversion at 41.46 misuse; while no misuse (zero) is recorded in the Past Simple tense.

DISCUSSION

In this discussion section of the paper the collected data on the correct use of the Past simple tense is going to be overlooked since as said earlier, it is the “exception which proves the rule;” collecting 100% correct use. It is also because Past Simple (PS) is going to be part of the discussion anyway as the alternative the participants resort to. The focus of the discussion is rather going to be dedicated to the two perfected tenses. One of the two paragraphs therefore, is going to be dedicated to discussing the data of on the use of the Present Prefect (PP), and the second to the Past Perfect (PTP) tense.

The data collected on the use of the Present Prefect (PP) tense show below average of 48. 87 out of the total 82 situations the speakers were expected to use and alternatively used the PS tense. Having the positive view first, the remnant correct uses include the common PP sentences that many EFL speakers perceive just as for example, “have you been to Dubai?”, and the affirmative, “I have never seen a person like this!”. Such common use which is a sense of expression rather than deliberate tense structure was referred to be Betty (1989). The researcher upon analyzing 48 students' sentences that included the present perfect tense, detected only 16 correct cases of using the PP tense correctly which were of this expression nature. However, the contrast here is a written use vs. spoken use is taken into consideration, which is most often in favor of the

written use where the learners has room to think. It is expected to be the same case with the TV programs' participants. For instance, one speaker in the TV show where context was the famous Lebanese family talk show host, Joanna, she produced the sentence, "*no viewer called so far...*", instead of the correct PP form, "*no viewer has called so far...*". To confirm this assumption from the few correct uses collected observation, one TV program speaker produced the sentence, "*We have already sent them an email and still waiting for their reply*". This is even though native English speakers break the PP rule particularly by using the adverb of time "already" as Lee & Sennef (2009) stated which they often times use it in Past Simple sentences.

The data collected on the use of the Past Perfect (PTP) tense show an average of 41.46 out of the total 82 situations the speakers were expected to use the PTP and alternatively used the PS tense. Noteworthy first of all, this PTP rate of 41.46 misuse is fewer than the rate of 48.87 PP tense misuses, is indicative to the EFL learners finding the PP tense to be more challenging than the PTP tense. Here rises the question: "is the PP tense use more challenging than the PTP tense use?" The answer is "yes" by Kashmiri (2020) who argues that the sentenced of PTP tense if fact is based on a PS clause, and the learners have to deal only with second [had+V3] clause. However, why not this very "second clause" being dropped from the sentence, is issue for our TV program speakers? Well, citing experts from the obtained conversation would help. One speaker where the context was memoir involving the late Saudi Arabia intellectual and former minister Dr. Ghazi Al-Qosaibi, the program quest was quoted as saying, "*he was a hard-working person even before he became a minister*". The speaker neglected the proper PTP tense use, he had been a hard-working person even before he became a minister". As Omari (2013) argued, the proper PTP tense use, is often neglected when it is a full sentence rather than a clause. The writer here is likely referring to one-clause PTP tense use, such as in the sentence, "The Bedouin had lived in tents for centuries". Although in such cases where the timing clause is omitted, it occurs usually within overall contexts which the listeners are aware of; like in the given example, "the Bedouin were then urbanized later one".

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that, a great deal of the Arab EFL speakers either miss properly using or avoiding English present and past perfect tenses in both of their formal and informal contexts of conversations. However, whether or not it is due to the grammar difference between the languages; Arabic only one past vs. English 3 pasts, cannot be confirmed for two reasons. The first reason is because the use of the two perfect tenses is also disregarded even by the native English speakers especially in the informal situations, and the speakers are simply influenced by them. The second reason is because the speakers could be observing their audience's average English proficiency and more focused on passing the message.

The recommendation to extend based on the conclusion of this study is a call for revising the perfect tenses content of the EFL course books that are allocated for the Arabic speaking students. Both the curriculum developers and co-teachers are advised to dedicate more content and time for addressing more essential and urgent English grammar areas.

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