

The Acquisition of English Tenses and Aspects' Categories by Saudi EFL Undergraduate Female Students at the University of Tabuk

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Abstract

The goal of this research is to investigate the acquisition of English tenses and aspects' categories by Saudi EFL undergraduate female students at the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia for the academic year 2018/2019. The sample of this study consisted of 30 female undergraduate students majoring in English Language and Literature. This quantitative –qualitative research used two research instruments are; questionnaire survey and pre-/post-tests. The findings of the research showed that the uses of tenses and aspects' categories differ from one student to another. Also, the results showed that only 47.8% of the students have provided the correct forms of simple past tense and past progressive tense. In addition, the findings showed that the category English present tense turns out to be most problematic for Saudi EFL undergraduate female students when learning and acquiring English language, particularly at the university of Tabuk/ Female Section. This research recommends that further future research be conducted in this context.

Keywords: Acquisition, Tenses, Aspects, Categories and EFL.

1. Introduction

English has developed to be the language of the world. It is the language of most academic institutions in this universe. It is taken as one of the most significant means of communication between different parts in the world. It is the language of science and technology. It is widely spread in the fields of science, technology, information, economy, commerce, cybernetics, international relationships, diplomacy, tourism, banking have been realized by every nation that is part of global race (Al-Seghayer, 2012). English language is used by about 450 million speakers around the world as both a foreign and a second language (Crystal, 1997: 360). Scholars such as Graddol (2006) demonstrate that the non-native users of English language outnumber the users of native speakers. English got its prominence from the increasing demands over the need for learning this language as an international language in varied regions in the world (Al-Faisal, 2006). Many countries in the world use English language as the means of communication at both school and university education levels.

Crystal (1997: 59) states that “the enlargement of British colonial power and the emergence of the United States of America as it is the powerful country in the world in economic power in the twentieth century” as the factors triggering the importance of English”. This could be one of the reasons or causes behind the spread of English as a global language in the world. For instance, English is the mother tongue of 70% of the speakers in the world, particularly in USA. It is the first language in USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the second language in Singapore, India, Malawi and over fifty other regions where it is used in country's chief institutions and a foreign language in China, Japan, Greece, Poland and many other countries. English language has taken the attention of many nations in the world because of the increasing demands and growth in varied

fields. This is viewed in the growing dominance and authority of English language in 50 countries in the world. It is used in 5 different continents in the world exceeding about 2.5 billion, about 49 per cent of the world's population (Mohammed, 2012). There is no language has reached the level of English language as an international language in the world (Crystal, 1997). Therefore, investigating the issue of teaching and learning English language as EFL or ESL has become very substantial in many countries in the world.

2. Literature Review

English as a foreign language learners face a lot of problems in the use of English tenses and aspects' categories, particularly at the written level of language (Al-Khotaba, 2013). The role of using English tenses and aspects is very significant not only in speaking but also in writing the views and ideas. So, productive skill refers to what the students know about English the acquisition and learning of English tenses and aspects' categories at the same time. Due to the significance of learning and acquiring English tenses and aspects much research has been conducted to investigate the use of prepositions in EFL context (Cook 1993). Scholars working in the area of language teaching identified the areas of language learning difficulties and came up with tools or approaches that could be used to address or eliminate these language difficulties and errors (Corder, 1967).

Dulay and Burt (1972:115) categorize sources of errors which they prefer to call "goofs" into four types: (a) interference-like goofs (errors which reflect native language structure), (b) L1 developmental goofs (those that do not reflect native language structure), (c) ambiguous goofs (those that can be classified as either 'interference-like goofs' or 'L1 developmental goofs'), and (d) unique goofs (those do not reflect L1 structure, and also not found in L1 acquisition data of the target language). James (1983: 179-189) proposes three major categories of errors: (a) interlingual errors or mother-tongue influence, (b) intralingual errors or target language causes which is further divided into two sub-categories, that is, (i) learning strategy-based errors (which occurs due to circumstances like false analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, exploiting redundancy, overlooking co-occurrence restrictions, hypercorrection, and overgeneralization or system-simplification) and (ii) communication strategy-based errors (when learners apply either holistic strategies or analytic strategies), and (c) induced errors which result more from the classroom situation than from intralingual errors and interlingual errors.

Mohammad (1982) adapts the generative semanticist approach to offer a contrastive analysis of the tense and aspect systems of MSA and English. He claims that the systems of these two languages are similar in some respects and quite different in others. He presents a hierarchy for expected difficulties that the language learner will have to combat. He concludes that the tense and aspect systems of English are much more complex than those of MSA and, therefore the English grammatical categories of verbs are more difficult to learn than the MSA. Apart from comparing the tense and aspects of both the languages, Mohammed also discusses some semantic categories on which there is very little agreement among linguists. For example, he includes "causative" and "participative" verbs as tense and aspect categories.

Much research focused on the errors made by Arab students learning English. Some of these studies attributed these errors by Arab learners to the difference and dissimilarities between Arabic and English language. Other studies conducted on Arab EFL learners attributed difficulties and errors encountered by Arab EFL learners to some other sources. Arab learners of English face a lot of difficulty in learning English because English and Arabic differ in their systems and structures. In connection, this study is an attempt to investigate the acquisition

of English tenses and aspects 'categories by Saudi EFL undergraduate female students at the University of Tabuk.

3. Statement of the Problem

Teaching and Learning of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia has been given much emphasis lately. Yet, EFL students in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab world show poor proficiency in learning and acquiring English language skills (Murad and Khalil, 2015). Much research has investigated the use of English tenses and aspects' categories in English language. Most of these researches showed that Arab learners in general produce a lot of errors in the use of these tenses and aspects such as the reference of omission, negation, agreement and word order (Mahmoud, 2015). Scholars and researchers such as (Al-Khresheh, 2015) state that Saudi EFL undergraduate female students face difficulties in learning English tenses and aspects' categories, particularly at university stage. They encounter many difficulties acquiring English tenses and aspects as well making a difference between them. This results in producing a lot of errors in their uses. Most female English language teachers at university stage do not pay enough attention to this problem (Al-Qurashi, 2011). This requires an immediate scholarly intervention to uncover the causes and reasons behind the difficulties of learning and acquiring English tenses and aspects' categories by female EFL learners in a Saudi context. So that a remedy could be put forth to help learners cope with such learning barriers.

4. Research Objectives

This research attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To Examine the Learning of English Tenses' Categories by Saudi Undergraduate Female Students at the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk.
- ii. To investigate the Acquisition of English Aspects 'Categories by Saudi Undergraduate Female Students at the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk.

5. The Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the English Tenses and Aspects' Categories Learnt by Saudi Undergraduate Female Students at the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk?
2. How do Saudi EFL Undergraduate Female Students at the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk Acquire English Aspects 'Categories?

6. The Research Methods

The data for this study were generated from 4th Year EFL undergraduate female students from the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk for the academic year 2018/2019. The sample of the study consisted of 30 female students in which the overall-population was 60 students. The sample of the study was selected randomly.

Table 3.1: Research Sample

Types of Data	Research Instruments	Source of Data	No of Participants	Data Collection	Data Analysis
Quantitative	Questionnaires	4th Year English Language and Translation Female Students Compositions	30 EFL Female Students	22-25 March 2018	SPSS
Qualitative	Pre-/Post-tests				

The researcher selected the sample based on three main criteria, respectively are; i) the participants' first language is Arabic, ii) they belong to the age group of 18 to 23 years, iii) they have started learning English from class 5th and iv) they did their schooling in public schools. In regards, the data of the current research used two different research instruments are; a questionnaire survey and pre/post-tests. The questionnaires included a number of sentences and free composition writing. In addition, this research used three types of tests were used by the researcher (Morrow et al, 1998). Morrow et al (1998) proposes that the test questions can be categorized into three types: a) objective questions; b) subjective questions (e.g., essays, composition writing, etc.); and c) semi-objective questions. The objective questions include the multiple choice questions. Multiple options are given and the subjects are supposed to select one option from the given options. Other types of objective questions include true/false questions, yes/no questions, matching questions. We have used the multiple choice questions in our study.

The questionnaires were in the form of sentences representing various English tenses and aspects. In this study, the researcher had prepared a list of thirty sentences comprising seven categories of English tenses and aspects. These sentences were provided with multiple options / responses. These sentences were distributed to a total of 30 EFL undergraduate Saudi female students at the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk/ Female Section in Saudi Arabia. Once the students finished the task of answering the multiple choice questions, composition test that involved a number of topic based questions were given to these participants and encouraged to write their responses in the form of narration. In order to elicit natural speech, questions included topics related to everyday life were given in composition test. Care was taken to see that the topics are simple and students can relate to, so that they can write their responses.

A total of six questions were given for composition test, out of which the participants were supposed to give their responses for three questions. Once the students had given their responses, their data was collected from them. In order to make them comfortable and feel at ease, we had taken the help of English teachers who were well acquainted with them. Their own teachers distributed the set of questions to them and later collected these from them.

7. Discussion and Findings

The findings of the study showed that there are a lot of differences in the acquisition and learning of English tense and aspects' categories. This was elicited from the responses of the 30 participants of EFL undergraduate female students at the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk/ female section for the academic year 2018/2019. The performances amongst the participants differ from one student to another. Thus, the statistical analysis of the data using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Tukey Post Hoc test revealed the difference and variation of the use of English tenses and aspects. Female students showed very poor performance in the use of all English tenses and aspects categories. Fig.1 depicts that the number of participants who reported incorrect use of simple present tense showed about 54.67% and those who indicated correct use of simple present revealed 45.33% as shown in Fig.2 below.

Fig.1: Incorrect Use of Simple Present Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Incorrect Use of Simple Present Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	15	18	1.34	6.40	54.67

Fig.2: Correct Use of Simple Present Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Correct Use of Simple Present Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	12	15	1.34	13.60	45.33

Likewise, the participants' performances in the tests and questionnaires are not correspondingly distributed. 48.89% of the participants indicated incorrect use of simple past tense as presented in Fig.3. Whilst, 51.11% of the participants showed correct use of simple past as displayed in Fig.4 below.

Fig.3: Incorrect Use of Simple Past Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Incorrect Use of Simple Past Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	14	16	1.15	14.67	48.89

Fig.4: Correct Use of Simple Past Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Correct Use of Simple Past Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	14	16	1.15	15.33	51.11

Similarly, Fig.5 displays the incorrect use of future tense. As shown, 44.44% of the participants recorded incorrect use of future tense, whilst Fig.6 in the same section shows that 55.56% of the participants used future tense correctly.

Fig.5: Incorrect Use of Future Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Incorrect Use of Future Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	11	18	4.04	13.33	44.44

Fig.6: Correct Use of Future Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Correct Use of Future Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	12	19	4.04	16.67	55.56

Also, the researcher used the ANOVA test to analyze the differences in the performance patterns amongst the 30 female English Language and Literature participants at the University of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia. The one-

way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test used in this study showed statistically significant differences in the uses of the various English tense and aspect categories amongst the 30 female participants. In addition, this study used Tukey Post Hoc test, which through multiple comparisons allowed the researcher to realize which students are significantly different from others. Tukey Post Hoc test showed a comparable pattern of statistically significant differences amongst the 30 students with regard to the uses of almost all English tenses and aspects excluding future tense. The relation between the female 30 participants with regard to the correct uses of the English tense and aspect categories, such as, simple present tense, simple past tense, present progressive, past progressive, present perfect tense and past perfect tense.

In this concern, Fig.7 and 8 in the following section reveal the incorrect and correct uses of present progressive tenses. As indicated in Fig.6, 54.17% of the participants used present progressive tense incorrectly, whilst 45.83% of them used present progressive tense correctly with different Std. deviation and mean.

Fig.7: The Incorrect Use of Present Progressive Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Incorrect Use of Present Progressive Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	15	17	0.95	16.25	54.17

Fig.8: The Correct Use of Present Progressive Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Correct Use of Present Progressive Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	13	15	0.95	13.75	45.83

On the other hand, the female students showed 48.89% incorrect use of past progressive tense in both the questionnaires and test compared to 51.11% correct uses of past progressive tense with different Std. Deviation and Mean as depicted in Figs. 9 and 10 respectively.

Fig.9: Incorrect Use of Past Progressive Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Incorrect Use of Past Progressive Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	14	15	0.57	14.67	48.89

Fig.10: Correct Use of Past Progressive Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Correct Use of Past Progressive Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	15	16	0.57	16.25	51.11

However, Fig. 11 and 12 show that 36.67% of the participants reported incorrect use of present perfect tense and 63.33% of them recorded correct use of present perfect tense with different Std. Deviation and Means as shown in the following section.

Fig. 11: Incorrect Use of Present Perfect Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Incorrect Use of Present Perfect Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	9	12	1.11	11.00	36.67

Fig. 12: Correct Use of Present Perfect Tense

Sample	No of Participants	Correct Use of Present Perfect Tense				
		Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation	Mean	Percentage
Sample1	30	18	21	1.11	19.00	63.33

The Analysis of the findings shows that female undergraduate students at the English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Tabuk indicate that participants make maximum errors in the use of English tense and aspect. These errors occur as a result of the influence of Arabic tense and aspect system. We have seen level one students achieve similar rate of success in using correctly “simple present tense” and “present progressive tense”. Unlike English, Arabic shows the imperfective distinctions prominently. The categories of present and progressive are included in the category of imperfective. The early learners are not able to distinguish the tense and aspectual distinction that exists in English. The perfective is used for past as well as past progressive situations in Arabic.

Though, it is hoped that the findings in this study may help in designing syllabus, study materials and improvising teaching methodology that can improve the efficacy of teaching English tenses and aspects to

Saudi EFL undergraduate female students at university level, particularly the University of Tabuk, learning English and can be a pointer towards further research.

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