



## **Contrastive Analysis: Difficulties Arabic Learners Face in Using English Language Tenses**

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### **Abstract**

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of different verb tenses in Arabic and English which caused errors by Arabic learners. The researcher provided a contrastive analysis of two different groups of tenses of English and Arabic: shared tenses and aspects as well as language specific tenses to determine if learners make errors based on different tense systems. The participants of this research were 35 freshmen students of Management Science at Yanbu University College (Female Campus). This research was a quantitative research and it used two grammar tests one examined the similar tenses and another examined the different tenses. The findings showed that shared tenses between English and Arabic received 91% correct answers while different tenses received only 27% correct answers. On the other hand, the wrong answers that shared similarities received 9% and differences received 73%. To sum up, the results showed that the differences in Arabic tenses were the main reason that affected learners' usage of English tenses.

**Keywords:** tenses, aspects, contrastive analysis, errors

### **INTRODUCTION**

Oldon (1989) stated the differences between English and Arabic in verb tense cause some problems. This research discussed a dilemma faced by most Arabic learners in using English tenses. Even though there is a universal grammar system for all languages, each language has a system especially for verb tense. Therefore, the learners face difficulties to identify different forms in a second/foreign language. Moreover, they confuse in using tenses regarding to: when the action happened, which action happened first, which action still continue and which action finished. One of the factors of committing errors in tenses may be assigned to different languages systems. From this perspective, the researcher suggested considering the problem from a new view through comparing tense system and finding out the differences and how few tenses might be translated into Arabic. The researcher tried to explore reasons behind students' errors. Lado (1964) conducted a contrastive analysis between foreign language and native language, and he discovered the difficulties that learners face in learning the foreign language.

Considering the above-mentioned research, this study aimed to examine the effect of Arabic tenses on the use of some English tenses produced by Arab learners of English as a foreign language.

This research highlights the differences between English and Arabic in verb tenses. In addition, this research attempts to help English instructors to investigate the reason behind students' errors. Moreover, it helps Arabic learners to understand the similarities and differences between Arabic and English tenses to avoid mistakes. This research attempted to answer the following question:

- Does the use of Arabic tenses affect the use of English tenses by Arab learners?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a theoretical background regarding tense system in understanding second/ foreign language acquisition.

### Key concepts

**Tenses:** The linguists defined the term tense as the action in a timeline from the past to the future which is related to the speaker (Ryding, 2005). Leach (2014) stated that the term tense does not only refer to the simple tense such as past and present but also indicates to present perfect tense, past progressive and etc. However, the linguists agreed that there are two basic tenses. In English, helping verb is used to demonstrate or express the tense. In Arabic, there are two finite forms: one is prefixed and another is un-prefixed (El-Sadek, 2014).

**Aspects:** The aspect deal with the action completion, partial or ongoing or not yet occur (Ryding, 2005). Leach (2014) defined the aspect as a primary category of perfect and progressive. In fact, he classified them into perfect, non-perfect, progressive and non-progressive. In English, the term perfect indicate to past and present simple tense form and the imperfect relies on present and past continuous forms. Odilavadze (2010) stated that Arabic is classified as an aspect more than tense. Alasmari et al (2018) pointed out that in Arabic, the perfect and imperfect verb can express multiple tenses and aspect depend on sentence meaning.

### Previous Studies

Albalawi (2016) investigated the effect of grammatical differences between English and Arabic in writing skill for Saudi female students. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether the errors in English language caused because of the interference of Arabic as the first language. This study was conducted at Prince Fahad bin Sultan University, Saudi Arabia. The participants were 120 Arabic female students in the foundation year program. The participants' age ranged between 20 and 23 and all students were native Arabic speakers. English language was used as the instruction at Prince Fahad University. The instrument was a test which requested an essay of 200-250 words. The students were asked to write about: How and where are they going to spend a holiday that summer. The test was distributed among students then collected back, corrected and analyzed the errors. The types of errors were categorized into 7 categories

which were: verb tense, prepositions, articles, active and passive voice, subject-verb agreement, word order, and plurality. The findings stated that the transfer of Arabic structure influenced students' writing skill. In addition, the result showed that students need to develop their writing skill. The percentage of grammatical errors made by the Saudi female students were 1179 errors. The highest percentage was in subject-verb agreement (26%= 306) and in verb tenses (19%=224).

Zahiri (2014) conducted a translation study of tense and aspect to investigate difficulties and solutions. This study aimed to present the difficulty that students face in present perfect weather it is simple or progressive. The focus assigned to find equivalent meaning and equivalent tense in Arabic for both perfective and imperfective aspects. This study was conducted in English department at Ibn Tofail University- Kenitra, Morocco. The participants were 24 males and 39 females who joined in English department and they were between 17 and 27 years old. All participants spoke Moroccan Arabic language and they studied English for 4 years. Also, they took grammar and translation courses before. This study used a quantitative research type and it used a translation test. The test asked students to translate sentences separately into English or into Arabic. After collecting tests, they were classified and then compared to correct answers. The result showed that 32 students used Arabic translation and 31 used English translation. Also, after the tests were analyzed the findings achieved the claim which the difficulty that students face in present perfect and present perfect progressive. The results showed that 16% out of 60% only used for present perfect tense. Also, for present perfect progressive 5% out of 20% of answers were achieved.

Mourssi (2013) investigated the cross linguistic interference of L1 in learning the grammar of L2 specifically the acquisition of past tense. This study aimed to find out the impact of Arabic as L1 in the acquisition of the simple past in English language context. This study was conducted in Omani government secondary high school. The participants were 74 Arab learners of English. The participants' level of English was pre-intermediate to intermediate level. They were between 16 and 18 years old and they studied English for eight years. This study was quantitative and the tool was a test attempt to explore the interlanguage phenomena in writing skill. The tests distributed in three stages which were 222 written texts. Each group submitted three written text of each sample. This study used two strategies in analyzing: transfer strategy and overgeneralization L2 strategy. The analysis focused on the acquisition of simple past tense forms. The results showed the impact of the interference of Arabic L1 in acquiring second language in general and as a particular in simple past tense. Moreover, the two strategies represented that Arabic participants had characteristics of acquisition of the simple past tense in English.

Muftah and Rafik-Galea (2013) conducted error analysis of present simple tense in the Interlanguage of Adult Arab English Language Learners. The aim of this study was to examine the problem that Arab learners face in acquisition specifically in using present simple. This study was conducted at Yamani universities. Most of the participants were 240 adult Arabic sophomores and juniors. The participants' average age was 21 years and they studied English for 9 years. This study was quantitative and it used two tasks to

collect the data: grammatical judgment task and an elicited written production task. The tests contained 24 sentences in present simple and the participants were asked to tick or cross answers. The tests had 12 correct answers and 12 ungrammatical sentences which were 6 omissions of 3sg-s and other 6 were ungrammatical. The results showed that the learners faced difficulty to master 3sg-s due to first language L1 interference.

Javed and Ahmad (2013) investigated English second language students' academic performance in tenses. The purpose was to measure students' performance in five tenses in secondary school for grade 10. The participants were 255 male and 141 female students and most of them were between 13 and 18 years old. This study was quantitative and the instrument was a test focusing on the performance in five tenses: simple present, simple future, past, present perfect and past perfect tense. The test contained 50 multiple choice questions. The test was for an hour and the brief guideline was given for students before the test. Then, the data was analyzed. The findings stated that the students were better in simple present, simple past and simple future as compared with the findings of the present perfect and past perfect. This study recommended improving students' weakness in some tenses.

The previous studies discussed contrastive analysis between English and Arabic among different grammatical areas. Most studies take into consideration all common errors whether in tenses or various categories. Few studies discussed errors in tenses particularly. However, this study is different because it focused not only on students' errors in verb tense but also on the reason behind these errors due to the differences between languages. Also, this study was conducted at Yanbu University College for freshmen students of Management Science.

## **METHOD**

### **Design of the Research**

The current research adopted a quantitative research type. The data were collected through two tests. Then, the answers were analysed into correct and incorrect answers and classified them into similar and different tenses.

### **Participants**

The participants of this research were 35 freshmen female students from Management Science department from Yanbu University College. They were native Arabic speakers and they were between 22 and 23 years old. They used English language as a language of instruction. They had studied English for 6 years in school and now they study writing skill course. Their language proficiency was between intermediate and high intermediate.

### **Instrument**

The research tools were two grammar tests:

Grammar test (1): the first test examined similar tenses that exist in English and Arabic languages which are: present simple and past simple. The Students were asked to translate two short paragraphs from English to Arabic (see Appendix A). Each paragraph had 6 marks and the total was out of 12 marks. This test was made by the researcher.

Grammar test (2): the second test consisted of six English aspects that cannot be translated directly to Arabic: 2 progressive tenses, 2 perfect tenses, and 2 perfect progressive tenses. The students were asked to identify the tense, then translate the sentences to Arabic and give equivalent meaning (see Appendix B). The test consisted of 6 sentences. Two marks were given for each sentence and the total was out of 12 marks.

Both tests were given during class time. Also, the researcher created the second test.

### Data collecting procedures

The researcher created two tests based on the similar and different tenses between English and Arabic. The tests focused on the following tenses: present simple, past simple, present progressive, past progressive, present perfect, past perfect, present perfect progressive and past perfect progressive. Then tests were distributed during class time, so all students participated. The researcher gave the students 40 minutes to answer the two tests. After collecting the tests, the researcher analysed them. Then, the researcher classified the results according to the correct and wrong answers due to the tense differences and similarities in Arabic and English. Finally, the researcher identified the reasons behind these errors and misunderstandings and suggested solutions for the detected grammatical mistakes.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows that students made 91% correct answers and 9% only wrong answers with sentences that have similar tenses in both languages. On the other hand, in different tenses students made 73% wrong answers and only 27% were correct.

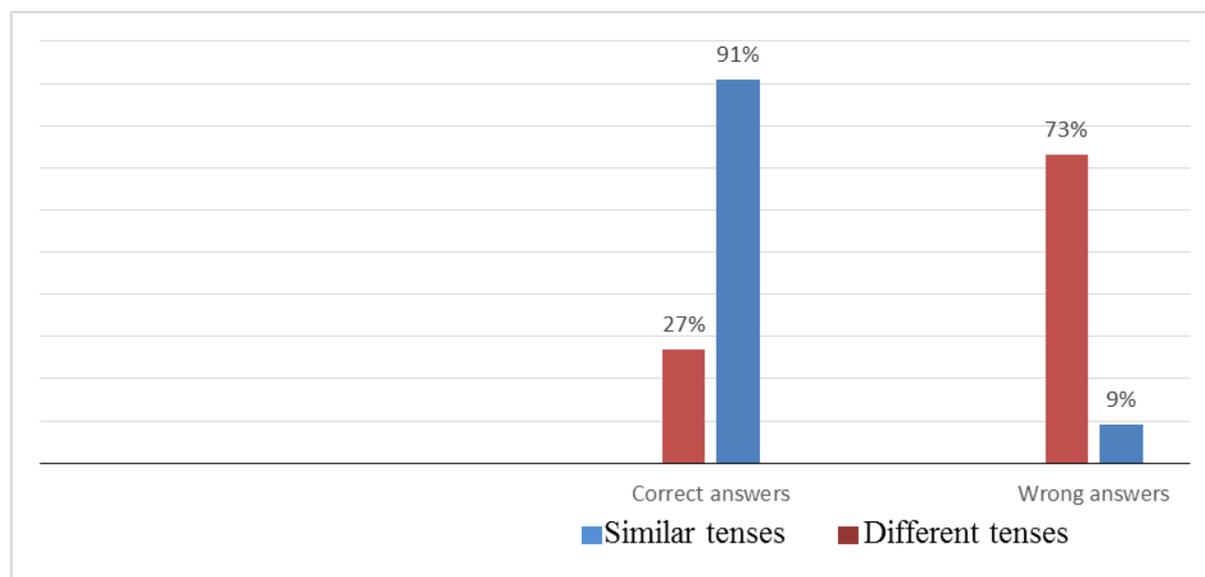


Figure 1. Correct vs. wrong vs. answers in the grammar tests

### Grammar test (1) similar tenses in English and Arabic

This test intended to see if Arabic learners of English make errors in translating similar tense aspects that are used in Arabic: simple present and simple past. The results are shown below in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The mean, maximum and minimum scores of similar tenses on the grammar test 1

Tenses	Simple Present	Simple Past
Number of students	35	35
Mean (6 points possible)	4.7	5.8
Maximum	6	6
Minimum	0	1

Table 1 shows that the tenses that are classified under similar tenses gained high results. The mean score was higher in the simple past than the simple present. Moreover, this result demonstrates that the participants performed well in both tenses. This suggests that learners face less challenges with English simple past and simple present. This is because these tenses are used in Arabic languages.

### Grammar test (2) different tenses in English and Arabic

The second test included 6 tenses which were: present progressive, past progressive, present perfect, past perfect, present perfect progressive and past perfect progressive. The aim was to investigate if Arabic learners face difficulties in using these tenses and whether differences between two systems are the reason behind these errors. The test contained 6 sentences, it requested students to identify tenses and then translate them into Arabic.

**Table 2.** The mean, maximum and minimum scores of different tenses on the grammar test 2

Tenses	Present progressive	Past progressive	Present perfect	Past perfect	Past perfect progressive	Present perfect progressive
Number of students	35	35	35	35	35	35
Mean (2 points possible)	1.05	0.88	0.54	0.11	1	0.08
Maximum	2	2	2	1	2	2
Minimum	0	0	0	0	0	0

This table shows the results of each particular tense. It is obvious here that the frequent errors are in present perfect progressive, then past perfect. In addition, the mean illustrates the other tenses' scores which are classified from more frequent errors into less errors: present perfect, past progressive and past perfect progressive. Also, the results showed that the present progressive tense had less errors as a comparison of other tenses. As this research is based on contrastive analysis, the researcher compared Arabic to English tenses as shown below.

***Present progressive:***

In the second test, sentence number 5 (see Appendix B. N 5). In question (A) 37% of students were able to identify the tense name while 63% of the answers were not correct. The result of (QB) also showed that 31% of translations were not correct while 69% were correct. The present progressive expresses the continuous action that does not finish. In English, the auxiliary verb and inflectional suffixes {-ING Vb} are used. In Arabic, there is no specific verb tense or auxiliary verb that expresses the action happening now. Only the main verb is used and changed to express the present continues. That is why most students received wrong answers due to the different form in Arabic language.

***Past progressive:***

In this tense, students' answers were 37% correct in (QA). The results clarified that 63% were wrong answers. In the (QB) 51% of answers were correct while 49% were not correct. This tense expresses an action that was continuous in the past. In fact, past progressive in Arabic is expressed by the free morpheme "kana" before the main verb. The most important reason behind students' wrong answers is that they translated it into past simple without using "kana." (See Appendix B.N 3)

***Past perfect progressive:***

In question (B) 54% of sentences were translated correctly, but in question (A) 91% of answers received wrong translations because students did not identify the name of the tense. However, they were able to provide correct translation by using main verb and auxiliary verb "kana" which is correct. In fact, this tense is not easy to express in Arabic because it does not exist there. In English, this tense expresses the duration of an activity that was in progress before another activity or time in the past. (See Appendix B.N 6)

***Present perfect:***

In this tense, 37% were correct answers and 63% were wrong in (QA). Students in (QB) used incorrect form for which the percentage was only 17% correct and 83% wrong. Many students identified the tense, but they could not use the correct form. Perfect tense is used for an action that happened in the past and continued to the present time. Thus, this tense expresses none finished action; therefore, it is the most confusing tense in English. In fact, second language learners acquire this tense late according to the morphemes order studies (Brown, 1973). In Arabic, one aspect word expresses this tense which is /qad/. Since there are two similar words in Arabic but they are used differently: /qad/ express an achieved action in the past, but /laqqad/ express confirmed action. (See Appendix B .N1)

***Past perfect:***

Few students answered (QA) for which the correct answers were just 9% and 91% were wrong. The students in (QB) were totally not able to translate correctly. This indicated the difficulty learners faced in this tense. The past perfect illustrates an activity that is completed before another activity in the past. In English, this tense presents the order of the action. On the other hand, there is no specific tense in Arabic that expresses action

order. In fact, the aspect /laqad/ expresses this tense which confirms the action. (See Appendix B.N 4)

### ***Present perfect progressive:***

In (QA) 6% of students identified the tense and only 3% of answers were translated correctly. In fact, most of the students were confused between this tense and the present perfect tense because there is a small difference between them. This tense demonstrates the duration of an activity that started in the past and continues up to now. In Arabic, there is a word to express this tense which is /lʔzæl/ which means "still." (See Appendix B.N2)

These results indicate the difficulties that Arabic learners face in English tense' usage due to the differences in Arabic. The results showed that learners have high number of errors in: present perfect, present perfect progressive, past progressive, past perfect, present progressive and present perfect progressive. The high percentages of errors above indicate the influence of Arabic on English. Actually, this answered the research question that Arabic tenses affect the use of English tenses. The results of this study agreed with the results of the Zahiri (2014) study where he found the difficulties learners face due to the differences. Moreover, Javed and Ahmad (2013) have similar results where the frequent errors were in the perfect tense and fewer errors were in simple present and simple past.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study aimed to find the effect of Arabic tenses on the use of English tenses. Moreover, this study focused on 8 tenses. In fact, the findings of this research showed a great effect of Arabic on English tenses. In addition, it showed that the tenses in English do not indicate that these tenses do not exist in Arabic such as perfect tense. In fact, Arabic use different functions to express these tenses. Also, it showed that the errors were not related only to the knowledge because even though students could identify the tense, they could not use the correct form.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The presented results in this research could not be generalized because of three main reasons. First, this study was implemented on small numbers of participants. Second, some sentences had two tenses, so they were confusing for students to identify them. The Previous studies used one tense for the whole sentence. Third, the time was very short to cover all aspects this study.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This type of contrastive analysis work clarifies why students face difficulties in using some tenses. This study showed that Arabic tenses have a primary effect on English tenses Moreover, students were not taught the meaning of particular tenses and the focus was to teach them the structure. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends students to know the differences and similarities between Arabic and English in verb tenses to avoid mistakes. Also, teachers should explain the meaning of the

aspect (not just the structure), so that learners can connect the English tense meaning to an equivalent aspect in Arabic.

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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A – Grammar Test (1)**

Q1. Translate the paragraphs from English into Arabic.

1- The Cities that Make Living Easy

Moving to a new place can be challenging no matter where in the world it is, but certain cities make day-to-day living a lot easier than others.

Answer:.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2- My last holiday was fantastic. I went to the mountains in a place called Salalah in Oman. The mountains were so green and the people were so friendly. I visited many places like, forts, beaches, the hotels at night and went shopping in the grand mall. I stayed there for 10 days. The weather was really nice and it was great for camping. So we went camping on the mountains and made a small fire.

Answer:.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**Appendix B – Grammar Test (2)**

Q2. Decide which tense is used, then translate the sentences from English into Arabic.

1- Zaid has watched this movie before.

1-The tense: .....

2-Answer.....  
.....

2- I have been reading this book since 1A.M.

A-The tense: .....

B-Answer.....  
.....

3- While Ali was playing tennis, the telephone rang.

A-The tense:.....

B-Answer.....  
.....

4- We arrived at the airport after the plane had taken off.

A-The tense:.....

B-Answer.....  
.....

5-The baby is sleeping. We do not want to wake him up.

A-The tense:.....

B-Answer.....  
.....

6- Laura finally called me last night, I had been waiting for that call for a long time.

A-The tense:.....

B-Answer.....  
.....