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(MAIN RESEARCH INTEREST IS L2 ACQUISITION, AND MORE SPECIFICALLY, ANALYZING L2 LEARNERS' ACQUIRED SYNTACTIC AND MORPH-SYNTACTIC PROPERTIES, AND HOW THEY ARE PROCESSED DURING DIFFERENT L2 ACQUISITION MILESTONES).

ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH TENSES AMONG ARABIC-ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY

Abstract

Arabic native speakers have difficulty expressing tense in English (Alsalmi, 2013; Mazyad, 1999). Therefore, this study examines Arabic native speaker learning English as a second language awareness of grammaticality in expressing future tense. In a tense comparison between the two languages tenses such as past, present and future, do not always have the same counterparts. It is well known that Arabic language has an impoverished system in the domain of aspirations of time – the absence of futurity. Alsalmi, (2013) notes that there are three significant differences in expressing future between the two languages. Findings will be used to show their awareness by level and will contribute to a better understanding of how to teach this grammatical element.

Keywords: Tense; Aspect; Acquisition; Arabic; English.

Introduction

In the field of English language acquisition, the acquisition of English tenses as a second language has been considered a problematic issue for many non-native speakers (Mazyad, 1999; Zhuang, 2010). These scholars argue that English tense is one of the most challenging parts of the acquisition process, particularly with Arabic native speakers because of the lack of a one-to-one correspondence in English and Arabic tenses. Therefore, this case study focuses on the acquisition of the English tense and aspect system by Arabic-speaking English language learners (ELLs).

Tense vs. Aspect of Verbs

Hockett (1958) defines tense as a category of grammar that expresses a time reference usually involving a specific form of a verb expressed through a conjugation pattern. Cook (1981) defines tense as a semantic category, which indicates present, past, or future, thus illustrating when an action or event takes place. Tenses typically express time relative to the moment of speaking, however tense can be further divided between absolute or relevant tense. Absolute tense refers to when the action took place in time of speaking versus relative tense which represents an action or event taking place relative to the established discourse. Tenses could be distinguished into two categories: morphological notion and semantic notion (Mohammed, 1982; Mazyad, 1999). The morphological notion of tense is defined from a linguistics perspective in which verbs tenses are represented through morphological units (Jespersen, 1962). In English these morphological units are referred to as inflectional morphemes that are divided into four categories of verbal: past tense “-ed”, past participle “-en”, present participle “-ing”, and third person singular “-s”. Through these endings and with the help of auxiliary modals time relationship is expressed in *twelve* English tense and aspect.

Expression of tense is often closely connected with expression of aspect. An aspect of a verb refers to how the verb denotes the flow of time, conveying temporal information outside of tense. More specifically aspect denotes duration, completion or frequency as it relates to the time of the action. For example, two commonly used aspects are perfective and imperfective (Frawly, 1992). In a perfective verb aspect, the action is conceived as bounded and unitary

without reference to any flow of time - An example being “I helped him.” No time of the action is indicated, no internal structure that illustrates a flow of time only that the action is completed. On the other hand, in the imperfective aspect the event has an internal structure such as a habitual action or one that is ongoing. An example being “I am helping him,” whereby the action started at an undesignated time but is continuing in this time space reference to the present and beyond.

The following table illustrates the differences between English and Arabic Tense.

Verb Tenses in English and Arabic

Tense		English	Arabic	Comparison
Future	Simple Future	x	b. Present simple: ألعبُ الكرة غدا alabu alkorata gadan Play the ball tomorrow	Semantically different form
		x	c. Active participle + future temporal adverbial: أنا لآعبُ الكرة غدا ana laabun alkorata gadan I playing the ball tomorrow	Semantically different form
		I am going to play ball	x	Morphologically different form
	Future Continuous	I am going to be playing ball	x	Morphologically different form
	Future perfect	I am going to have played ball	x	Morphologically different form
	Future perfect continuous	I will have been playing ball	Future perfect: سأكون قد لعبتُ الكرة لمدة ساعة sa-/sawfa akunu qad laabtu alkorah mudata saa'atan Will be have played the ball for an hour	Semantically different form
		I am going to have been playing ball	x	Morphologically different form

Due to the morphological differences between Arabic and English the planned action of English “I’m going to” does not exist in Arabic. Furthermore, future continuous in English uses two forms to denote futurity, whereas future continuous in Arabic does correspond semantically to English, but the internal structure in Arabic is different. Since planned actions, such as I’m

going to play ball, do not exist in Arabic, the future perfect as expressed in the English form: *I am going to have played ball*, cannot occur. Where English uses two forms to express future perfect continuous (either with the will structure or the going to structure), Arabic uses future perfect instead.

As previously stated, English and Arabic do not hold one-to-one correspondence in their expression of tense. Therefore, Arabic verb forms often have different functions to express English counterparts, such that there are at least two verbal forms in Arabic to express a verbal form in English (Lado, 1957). Since the difficulty in learning L2 relies on the distance between the native language and the target language as expressed by the markedness model, learning verb tenses between the two languages can cause negative transfer.

Alsalmi (2013), stated "learners of L2 tend to apply knowledge from their native language to a second language when speaking or writing" (p. 279). Hence, these amounts of elements that are between the two languages may cause more negative transfer, as well as more difficulty for ELLs. Further research is needed to explore the influence of L1 on L2 within language transfer in order to see whether the difficulty of the acquisition of tenses can eventually be overcome or it is a possible candidate for fossilization.

Research Methodology

This paper, illustrates a one-subject intervention case-study that was part of a larger mixed methods study on Arabic/English tense recognition. From the twenty subjects elicited who participated in the larger study (Alqadhibi, 2017), one person was recruited for the intervention sessions which explicitly taught tense with specific attention given to the use of expressing "future wish" in English as this is a feature that has no exact equivalent in Arabic and through the literature has been proven to be influenced by negative transfer. This participant attended three intervention workshops across a two-week period that were specifically designed to teach English tense to Arabic native speakers. The lesson-plans used in the intervention workshops were designed based on the subject's results on a translation task and sentence prompt errors. At the end of the intervention workshop lessons a satisfaction survey given to the participant on the last day of the intervention workshop to measure whether or not the subject felt that this intervention helped him improve his use of tense. Three-days after the last intervention workshop, the participant was again asked to complete the same translation task and sentence

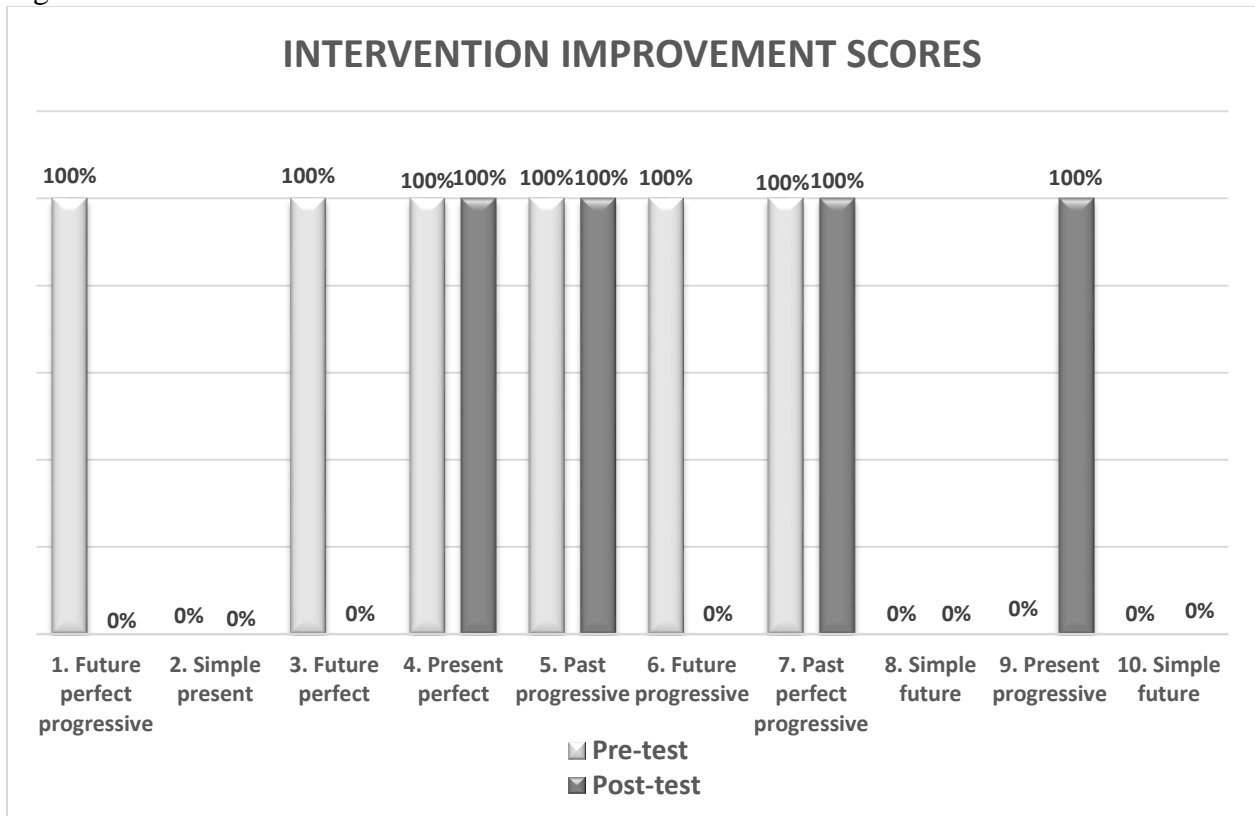
prompt exercise in order to ascertain if the intervention workshop lessons helped him improve his usage of English tense.

Findings and Analysis

Pre/Post-tests Translation Tasks

At the end of the intervention sessions, the participant was asked to re-take the pretest translation task and sentence prompts, as well as complete a five-question satisfaction survey using a five-point Likert scale. Figure 1: Intervention Improvement Scores illustrates the subjects original scores and his improvement after he intervention sessions.

Figure 1



Translation prompt #1 required the usage of a future perfect progressive tense. It reads as follows:

في الأول من أكتوبر سأكون قد عشت في منزلي هذا لمدة عشر سنوات بالضبط

On the first of October, I will have been living in my present home for exactly ten years.

As illustrated in Figure 1 above, the subject did not respond correctly in the pre-test.

Instead, he used a wrong usage (100%).

Translation prompt #2 requires using the simple present. It reads as follows:

أنا دائماً أنهض مبكراً

I always wake up early.

From this translation prompt (c.f. Figure 1) the participant responded correctly in both tests (0%).

Translation prompt #3 requires using the future perfect tense in the sentence:

بحلول الساعة الثانية والنصف بعد الظهر، سيكون قد استلم الطلبات

By 2:30 p.m., he will have received the applications.

In this prompt, the subject responded incorrectly. The mistake that he made in the pre-test was in employing the simple future instead (100%). However, in the post-test, he answered correctly (0%)

Translation prompt #4 requires using the present perfect tense. It reads as follows:

لقد وافق على أن يحضر الحفلة

He has agreed to come to the party.

From this translation prompt (c.f. Figure 1) the subject responded incorrectly in both pre/post-tests (100%).

Translation prompt #5 requires the use of past progressive tense in the sentence:

بينما كنت أقرأ الصحيفة، طرق الباب

While I was reading the newspaper, he knocked the door.

As shown in Figure 1, the subject answered incorrectly in the pre-tests (100%). And he has misused the past progressive tense, he employed the simple present instead (100%).

Translation prompt #6 requires the use of future progressive. It reads as follows:

سوف أنتظرك الليلة الساعة ٧ مساءً

I will be waiting for you tonight at 7 p.m.

From this translation prompt (c.f. Figure 1), the subject did not respond correctly in the pre-test. Instead, he used a wrong usage (100%).

Translation prompt #7 read as follows:

بدأ عليه التعب. كان يعمل بإجتهاد لمدة ساعتين

He looked tired. He had been working for two hours.

This prompt requires using the past perfect progressive tense. As illustrated in Figure 1 above, it required the usage of a past perfect progressive tense. The subject answered incorrectly in the pre-tests, in which he employed the past progressive tense instead (100%). And wrong usage in the post-test (100%).

Translation prompt #8 requires using the simple future tense. It reads as follows:

سوف يتزوج الصيف القادم

He is going to get married next summer.

From this translation prompt (c.f. Figure 1) the participant responded correctly in both tests (0%).

Translation prompt #9 requires the use of present progressive. It reads as follows:

هي تتناول الفطور الآن

She is having breakfast now.

From this translation prompt (c.f. Figure 1), the subject answered correctly in the pre-test (0%). And has wrong usage in the post-test (100%).

Translation prompt #10 reads as follows:

هو سوف يأكل الليلة

He is eating tonight.

This prompt requires the use of simple future. As illustrated in Figure 1 above, the subject responded correctly in both pre/post-tests (0%).

Once the participant continued in the intervention sessions, his post-test translation tasks and sentence prompts were analyzed for total number and type of errors and then compared

against his first testing for error type, changes and influence of direct instruction. Scores improvement on the second translation task was also compared to survey data collected.

The findings in this study confirmed that Arabic-speaking English language learner has difficulty in acquiring English tenses. The participant scored overall 40% in the pre-test and 60% in the post-test translation task. Hence, he was classified as having difficulty in acquiring English tenses. The least amount of errors occurred in the simple present and simple future. These results may indicate the amount of time textbook publishers and teachers spend on introducing these tenses as well as a number of time that the student has spent studying English. Thus, the results can be attributed to L1 influence of the different elements between these two languages (Alsalmi, 2013; Whitley, 2002).

Pre/Post-tests Sentence Prompts

Ten sentence prompts are part of this exercise, illustrating examples of present, past and future tenses. The participant was required to read these sentences and identify all that were written correctly to express a future wish in English. As in case study, the participant has no problematic issues with futurity. This was based on his results in both pre/post-tests sentence prompts (c.f. Figure 2).

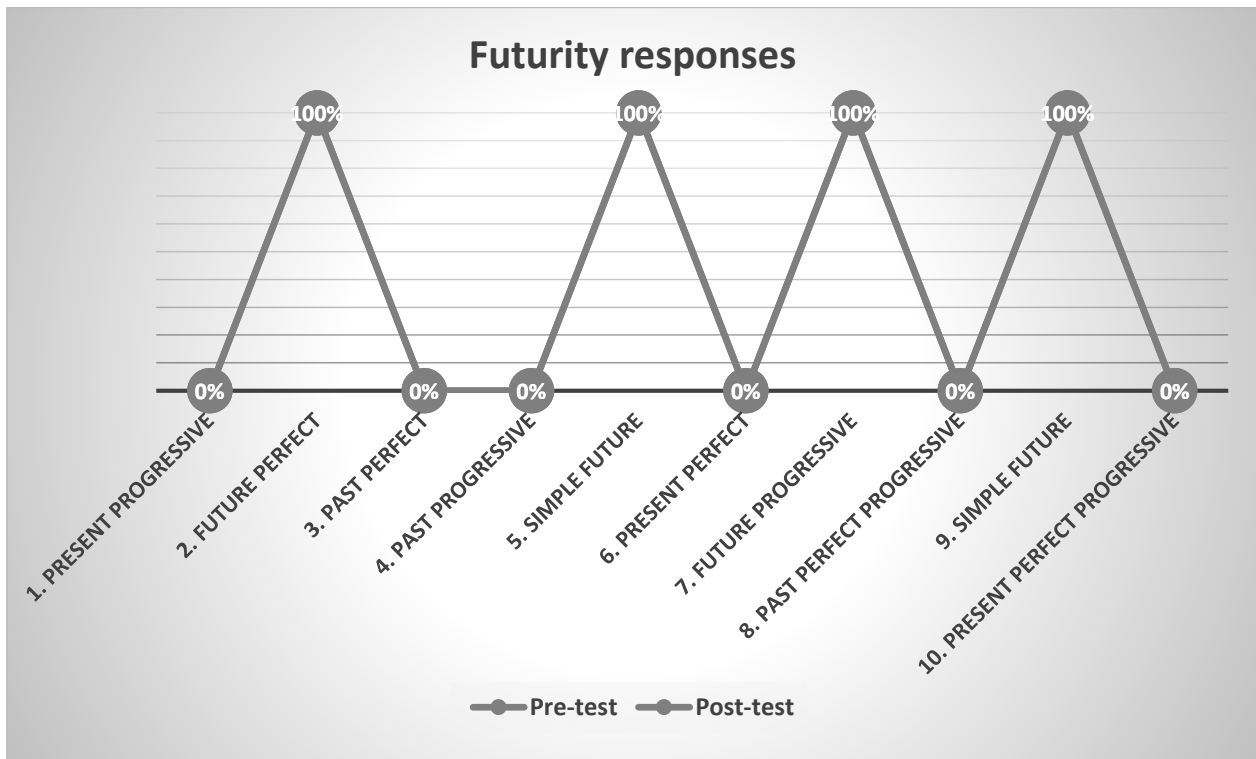


Figure 2 shows the participant’s responses in between the pre/post-tests sentence prompts tasks.

Figure 2 presented that the participant has no problematic issues for choose futurity in pre/post-tests sentence prompts tasks. He has adequate knowledge to pick the future tense in English correctly.

The participant was also asked to complete a five-question satisfaction survey using a five-point Likert scale (e.g., did the workshops contribute to their understanding and use of English tenses) – he said, strongly agree that “*these instructions helped him and increased his confidence, along with better able to understand a future tense*”. Moreover, agrees that “*he comprehended these grammatical elements and felt more confident to apply this tense*”.

Discussion

The subject in this case study proved the correct usage; when he was asked to take the post-test translation task (e.g., in all future tenses). However, in present perfect, past progressive, and past perfect progressive tense – the subject failed in both pre/post-tests due to the L1 influence along with different elements between these two languages (Alsalmi, 2013; Stanley, 2002). In this regard, the subject should be given a solid background about the usage of tenses in general. English teachers have to explain time in English accurately, rather than taking an implicit approach to tense and/or assuming non-native speakers of English will comprehend them as long as they have been given standard rules (Al-Khawalda, 2013; Hinkel, 1997). Therefore, lesson-plans have been designed for the subject based on his performance in the pretest translation task. An explicit approach was used with the subject that taught him grammatical rules focusing on futurity within a two-week period. Thus, the subject made progress in all futurity but he struggled with both of perfective and imperfective verbs aspect that were not emphasized in the intervention sessions.

Pedagogical Implication

In the light of the findings of this study, the results revealed that the native language does influence the acquisition of English tenses, along with different elements between these two languages. Furthermore, Arabic native speakers have a problematic issue which the overgeneralization of the use of the perfective and imperfective verbs aspect due to L1 transfer. For example, tense in Arabic are expressed through perfectives, which are characterized by suffixation, and imperfective by prefixation or by combining prefix and suffix together. Hence,

there is a need for a pedagogical approach to help learners to acquire the target verb tenses of English effectively.

In teaching English verb tenses, teachers should directly target tense. For instance, past progressive in English denotes two actions that happened at the same time in the past, where one action was interrupted by another action. After teachers present an authentic text, the learners should be encouraged to focus on the use of each verb, by asking them to identify the roles of these verbs in the text. Following such exercises, the learners are engaged in a discussion about the difference in the meanings of verb aspect in the perfective and imperfective within the text. Additional exercises that primarily emphasize the use of the verb tenses should follow.

Implementing more explicit instruction may help the learner understand the element before negative transfer takes place (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Following a deductive approach in teaching English tenses may make students more aware of the differences and help them self-monitor their usage. An example in future perfect progressive that have semantic different form of this tense – future perfect is below.

“I will have been playing ball”

"سأكونُ قد لعبتُ الكرة لمدة ساعة"

/sa-/sawfa akunu qad laabtu alkorah mudata saa'atan/

Therefore, ESL instructors should explicitly explain what role each verb has. Thus, deductive teaching could solve issues of misleading or misuse by showing the learners the correct usage of a specific verb tenses.

Teachers should enhance or motivate their learners to be aware of their errors, how the learners' L1 may influence their production of acquiring English tenses, as well the differences between their L1 tenses and English tenses. This would sharpen the learners' awareness that they cannot always apply their L1 knowledge to the L2, hence it would help them avoid and reduce misuse before the L1 interference occurs on acquiring English tenses through their learning process (Al-Zoubi, & Abu-Eid, 2014).

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