

The Familiar Challenge of Present Perfect versus Past Tenses in Teaching Arab Students Paragraph Writing

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Abstract

Teaching the present perfect to Jordanian students is a challenging situation which needs extra effort from both the teacher and the students as well. This study aims to explore the reasons behind the misuse of present perfect and past tense by Jordanian students while writing a paragraph. The participants of the study are 26 female sophomore students majoring in the English language. Moreover, the participants are divided into experimental and controlled groups. Based on the above, the researcher proposes an instructional program which will aid students in overcoming this problem. The instrument of the study is an achievement test where students must write a paragraph on a topic which will require them to use the present perfect. The data is analyzed by using the SPSS statistical program. The results show that performance of the experimental group on the achievement test is better than the performance of the controlled group. Based on the results of the study, the researcher proposed a set of recommendation.

Introduction

Studying the English language is compulsory in Jordan and starts at the elementary stages up to university. As a result, English grammar is one of the essential parts of language learning that students have to master. This is because grammar is used in all English language skills whether it be writing, speaking, listening, or reading. According to Depdiknas (2006), English grammar is very important in building essential knowledge of the English language, and it increases students' motivation to learn the English language. During this journey, Jordanian students suffer from certain obstacles in learning English grammar such as the present perfect and its relation to the past tense in terms of the time of actions. This study focuses on analyzing the present perfect and its relation to the past tense. Moreover, the researcher proposes a program based on the form of present perfect and the practice of this tense in authentic situations in an attempt to overcome the problem of using the present perfect.

Related Literature

When learning a foreign language, one encounters many difficulties in grasping the target language (Liszka, 2004; BaSaeed, 2013). According to Mayor (2012) and O'Brien (2003), these difficulties are countless in terms of syntax, semantics, phonology, and so on. Yet, each language has its own features whether they be in the grammatical rules, tenses, adverbials, or the time of speech. However, the most notable hiccups in acquiring a foreign language are using the present perfect tense in terms of the timing of this tense (Matter, 2001). This difficulty of using the present perfect makes it impossible for Arab learners to harmonize between the verb and its time compatible to the target language which, in the case of this study, is English.

According to many educators and researchers (Al-Jarf, 2000; Matter, 2001; Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, 2007), the difficulty in grasping the present perfect is due to the equivalent existence of the present perfect tense in the Arabic Language, and Arabic language learners tend to replace the present perfect tense with the simple past. Consequently, Arab learners try to find an equivalent tense from their mother language as a negative interference of the Arabic which, in turn, influences their performance while learning the English language. Because of the non-existence of the present perfect in Arabic, Arabic learners of English are likely used to transferring and borrowing the form and function of Arabic into English. As a result, this interference of the mother language is considered to be a negative influence on performance while learning English. Thus, they tend to make terrible errors since they are influenced heavily by their native language (Al-Jarf, 2000; Brown, 2000; Mohammed, 2004).

Furthermore, this error is performed by most Arab learners at both the early stages of acquiring the English and at the advanced stages, as well. According to Khalil (2015) and Sabra (2020), one of the main reasons for students making errors is the wrongful use of the interference of their mother language because of the differences in the usage of verb tenses in both the English and Arabic languages.

Likewise, Mattar (2001) and AbiSamra (2003) add that English combines a choice of tenses involving simple (present and past), perfect, and progressive aspects. On the other hand, Arabic makes two fundamental distinctions: the perfect, which is used to describe an action completed in the past, and the imperfect, which is used to describe an action that is not yet completed in the present or indicates the future. These aspects are not based on the timing of the action, but on the completion or incompleteness of the activity. Thus, they conclude that Arab learners tend to replace the present perfect tense with the simple past because of the significant difference between the two aspectual systems.

This interference of the mother language is mainly due to the misunderstanding of the practical and semantic features of the present perfect (Ryding, 2005; Cowan, 2008; Parrot, 2010; Cakir, 2011). They confirm that Arab learners of English as a Foreign Language often tend to avoid using the present perfect tense or use it improperly, using the simple past instead (Huddleston and Pullum (2002). They add that students are not conscious or aware of the meaning of present perfect which is neither a present nor past, but rather a mixture between these tenses (Jabak, 2007). This avoidance is partly due to a lack of understanding of the function of the present perfect tense, especially in contrast with the simple past (Harmer, 2007; Cakir, 2011; Leech, 2014). Such lack of understanding of a grammatical feature usually intersects with not expecting it to exist at all, which leads to the role of first language interference. Therefore, students fail to find an existing equivalent of the concept, and although they know the form of the present perfect, they fail to use it correctly.

Related Studies

Several studies have extensively researched and documented the difficulties Arab learners face when using the present perfect. Most of these studies have found an association between the misuse of the present perfect and other factors, namely, the non-existence of perfect tenses in Arabic, the interference of the mother language, and the misunderstanding of the practical and semantic features of the present perfect. The factors above that are supposed to have influence over using the present perfect have been explored in several studies.

In investigating the interference of Arabic as a first language on learning English as a Foreign Language in English writing passages, Mattar (2001) and Albalawi (2016) examined Arab university errors made by students which can be attributed to their mother tongue interference during writing a passage of 200-250 words. The results of the studies posited that one of these errors was in using English tenses due to the interference of Arabic while writing in English.

Other researchers (Gadallah, 2006; Abu-Joudeh, Al-Shboul, and Assafeh, 2013; Al-Jouhani, 2019) have highlighted the relevance of the absence of present perfect in the Arabic language when using the present perfect in acquiring the English language. In their studies, they concluded that the present perfect tense in English does not indicate any absence in Arabic; instead, Arabic learners used different functions to convey this tense. They added that these errors were because no perfect aspect exists in the Arabic language, and their first language limited their ability to use the present perfect. Furthermore, they showed that the errors were not related only to the participants' knowledge because even though students could identify the tense, they could not use the correct form.

Nonetheless, other researchers who have looked at the problematic knowledge of present perfect have found that learners do not understand the meaning of this tense correctly including Khwaileh and Shoumali (2000); Zhiri (2014); Atashian and Al-Bahri (2018). Consequently, their studies concluded that the most frequent mistakes were in tenses, especially in using the perfect tense. The researchers concluded that this error is because Arab EFL learners have problems in understanding the perfect tense since it has no equivalent verb in Arabic, and it is usually mistaken with the simple past.

Problem of the Study

Studying the English language in Jordan is compulsory starting from elementary school up to high school. During this journey, those learning English as a Foreign Language encounter many obstacles and difficulties. This study discusses difficulties that Jordanian learners encounter when using the present perfect while writing paragraphs in English. Moreover, these obstacles are considered stumbling blocks for Jordanian students whether at universities or schools. These reasons hinder students from having a suitable competency when it comes to writing a paragraph in English using the present perfect. Through this researcher's experience in teaching English as a Foreign Language, the problem of present perfect is never-ending as a common mistake students make, and it creates a knowledge gap of the present perfect among students majoring in the English language at Al-Balqa Applied University. Even at public and private schools, teachers teach the present perfect theoretically and out of context. Furthermore, teachers tend to teach present perfect through the use of controlled and tailored examples specifically to emphasize its grammatical aspects.

In this study, the researcher proposes a program that schoolteachers and university professors can use to help their students overcome their problems with using the present perfect tense in English, and especially when writing a paragraph. This program is formulated to do exactly that.

Hypothesis of the Study

This research aims at testing the following hypothesis:

There is no statistically significant difference between the experimental group and the controlled group at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the English mean scores of sophomore students majoring in English when it comes to using present perfect tense due to the above-mentioned instructional program.

Methodology

The design of the study was quasi-experimental. The participants were randomly assigned to controlled and experimental groups. The participants of the study were twenty-six sophomore students studying English at Al-Balqa Applied University in Jordan. The experimental group consisted of thirteen students, and the group consisted of thirteen students as well. All of them successfully passed the grammar course as a prerequisite for the paragraph writing course. The proposed program will last for four weeks during the academic year 2019-2020.

Instruments of the Study

1. An achievement test on writing a paragraph (85-90 words) on the following topic "What things have you done or achieved so far that made you proud of yourself?" This type of topic cannot be evaluated unless students use the present perfect. As a result, this topic will help the professors identify their students' problems when using the tense being evaluated - that of present perfect.
2. El-Koumy's Scale for Marking Students' Writing

The Instructional Program

The researcher has developed an instructional program for the experimental group that teaches students the present perfect tense and how to use it in its correct context. The instructional program consists of 3 steps:

Step One

The first step is to introduce some of the differences between the Arabic and English languages with examples (feminine and masculine adjectives, dual verbs, vowels, pronouns, singular and plural verbs, etc.) This step aims to show students the absence of some of Arabic language grammar that does not exist in English and vice versa.

Step Two

This step shows students, through examples, the differences between the past and perfect tense depending on the instructional strategy of finished and unfinished, time, actions, habits, or states along using examples provided by the teacher and the students themselves that are taken from their real experience and everyday lives. The aim of this step is to master practicing the present perfect and the past tenses as well as learning to differentiate between the two tenses. It is also essential to provide them with plenty of time to practice in context rather than memorizing the rules theoretically. From the researcher's experience in teaching writing, this step is the most important one as Jordanian students tend to learn more from examples and practice than anything else.

Step Three

The last step is having students write their own paragraph on a topic given by the professor that requires them to answer in the present perfect.

The Traditional Way of Teaching the Present Perfect

The controlled group's teacher used the traditional way of teaching present perfect by introducing the rules and the key words with some controlled activities.

Results and Discussion

After assigning the experimental group and the controlled group, a pre-test was given to both groups to find out whether the two groups are equal or not. After the experiment, the same test was repeated for both groups as a post-test to investigate the differences between them.

Table 1

Groups	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Controlled	3.92	13	2.019	
Experimental	4.08	13	2.216	.855
Total	4.00	26	2.078	

Table 1 illustrates that the controlled group's mean score on the pre-test was (3.92) with a standard deviation of (2.019). On the other hand, the experimental group's mean score on the pre-test was (4.08) with a standard deviation of (2.216).

To test the hypothesis of the study, an ANCOVA was run using the post-test as a dependent variable and the pre-test as the covariate. The results of the analysis of writing test scores where the students had to use the use of present perfect are shown below in Table 2:

Table 2

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	76.694 ^a	2	38.347	20.366	.000	.639
Intercept	30.125	1	30.125	15.999	.001	.410
pretest groups	46.540	1	46.540	24.718	.000	.518
Error	27.351	1	27.351	14.526	.001	.387
Total	43.306	23	1.883			
Corrected Total	770.000	26				
	120.000	25				

a. R Squared = .639 (Adjusted R Squared = .608)

As shown in Table 2, the F value equals (14.526) which is significant at (.001). This provides evidence that there is significant difference between the controlled and experimental groups in the adjusted mean scores of students writing using the present perfect correctly in favor of the experimental group. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion

The better achievement of the experimental group could be attributed to the proposed program developed by the researcher. In introducing the differences between English and Arabic with examples, the students were aware that every language has its own grammatical categories, structure, and meaning (Mukattash, 1980; Holes, 1990; Cowan, 2008; Parrot, 2010). According to Muktesh (1980), these differences between the two languages are definitely the problem behind the misuse or mastering of the present perfect by Arab students.

However, the present perfect in Arabic exists in term of concept, but is no way similar to the present perfect in English. In recognizing, with examples, the enormous differences between the two languages, students will think much more before translating English into Arabic or even borrowing equal verbs.

In this stage, students are aware that there is no one-to-one Arabic present perfect and English present perfect. From the researcher's experience in teaching writing for university students, the root of using the present perfect starts at schools.

Most teachers teach the present perfect theoretically by introducing the key words and the form of the present perfect tense followed by drills taken from the text book. Consequently, students memorize the present perfect form theoretically without any adequate or authentic practices on when or how to use it. According to Dorfman (1996), practice is considered an essential skill to enable students to utilize and gain the information given by the teacher through practicing this information continuously. The insufficient amount and inadequate opportunity for practicing the present perfect are the reason behind determining the low achievement of students in mastering this tense. Unfortunately, university professors and schoolteachers alike tend to provide students with theoretical information on the form and rules of the present perfect without paying any attention to the idea of practice makes progress as an essential element in the process of learning English as a foreign language.

Conclusion

There are several reasons why Jordanian students struggle and make numerous errors when using the present perfect and the past tense in English. One of these reasons is the absence of an equivalent to the present perfect in the Arabic language. Fact is, English grammar differs from Arabic language grammar. The present perfect tense, for example, does not exist in Arabic which leads to the interference of the mother language hoping to find through translation an equivalent tense of the present perfect from the Arabic language (Murad and Khalil, 2015). This negative interference and translation are considered a stumbling block in learning the present perfect because the closest Arabic has to the present perfect is the past tense. This confusion is mostly due to the misunderstanding of the meaning of present perfect and how to use it in the correct context. Unfortunately, most students learn English for 14 years, yet they are still unable to use the present perfect correctly. Teachers are taking part in aggravating this problem because they explain the structure of the present perfect using only a few drills as a practice of this tense.

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