

The Dilemma of Utilising the Present Perfect Tense in English Writing by Arab English Learners

Screen Mousa Jubran

English Department, Al-Balqa Applied University, Amman, Jordan

Sura Mohammad Khrais

English Department, Al-Balqa Applied University, Amman, Jordan

Abstract—This study diagnoses the challenges of foreign language learners in using the present perfect tense when writing in English. Most foreign language learners fail to correctly write sentences using the present perfect tense and substitute it with the past tense. The researchers suggest an instructional program based on steps for teachers to solve the problem of the present perfect tense. The study sample is twenty students in the seventh grade in one of the government schools for girls. The researchers asked the participants to write sentences using the present perfect tense. After analysing students' sentences, the researchers detected many incorrect cases of using of the present perfect tense and highlighted the incorrect usage for discussion. The results show that most errors stemmed from Arabic words interfering with English. The present perfect tense presents more significant challenges for Arab students than the simple past tense. The study showed that students' native language influences English grammatical structure use. These results have significant implications for how the mother language affects EFL classrooms. The results also reflect the students' misunderstanding of the meaning of the present perfect since they are unfamiliar with the function of the present tense. Finally, teachers are part of the problem because they follow the traditional grammar teaching method, which focuses on structure rather than function. The researchers suggest a series of recommendations based on the study's findings.

Index Terms—grammar, English tenses, present perfect tense, challenges, foreign language learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Arabic and English have significantly different grammar since they are not related linguistically. There are grammatical aspects of English language that do not exist in Arabic. Therefore, Arab students struggle with these features, particularly with applying certain tenses and functions.

Grammar is essential to learning a foreign language, although it is one of the most complex parts of a foreign language to remember. The speakers of the same language spontaneously understand the grammar system and know its word sound meanings and sentence structure (Elturki, 2014). According to Muktesh (1980) and Parrot (2010), every language possesses its unique grammatical categories, as well as its unique structure and meaning. They added that the differences between the two languages are unquestionably the source of the issue that leads to Arab students misusing or failing to understand the use of the present perfect.

Because grammar governs the structure of clauses, phrases, and words in any language, it helps foreign language learners to comprehend how words and their parts build sentences. Also, understanding grammar can assist students in enhancing their analytical and critical thinking abilities and learning how language functions help them understand the nuances of meanings, place patterns, and link different ideas. Grammar enhances fluency, strengthens communication, helps students think logically, and improves verbal accuracy. These abilities are crucial for many other aspects of learning and language use.

Tenses are one of the most essential aspects of English grammar for EFL students to learn. Language proficiency can be gauged by having students correctly identify the tense they should use in each sentence (Jubran et al., 2023). Students need to be able to write in the appropriate tenses because of the correlation between grammar and sentence quality. When teaching English grammar to foreign language learners, teachers struggle as they face complicated obstacles in teaching some concepts, specifically when to use the present perfect. Compared to studying English in an English-speaking country, the challenges of learning English in a non-English-speaking country may be more substantial.

Jordanian students spend years studying grammar, yet they still struggle with the present perfect, providing students with many challenges. According to Jubran (2021), learners of English as a foreign language at any level struggle with the perfect component tense. So, to solve these challenges of using the present perfect tense, the researchers suggest a program consisting of steps to follow when using the present perfect and past tense forms.

Many Jordanian students at all education levels lack the skills to write fluently using the present perfect tense when composing English sentences. Foreign language learners consider these challenges significant roadblocks that hinder them from correctly forming a piece of writing.

Among English language learners at one of the Jordanian schools, the problem of the present perfect is perpetual since it is a standard error which students make. Most schoolteachers teach the present perfect theoretically by demonstrating the grammatical features of the present perfect tense using carefully selected and tailored examples. This method of teaching present perfect tense leads students to merely memorise the form of the tense only without being able to use it in the proper context. Even if students do well on a grammar test, that does not mean they can write coherent and error-free sentences.

Therefore, this study suggests some steps to solve this problem in order to assist students in overcoming their difficulties with using the Present Perfect tense in English. Hopefully, the result of this study will help schoolteachers of Basic Grammar to make some additional practices or exercises about the present perfect in their teaching and learning activity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the attempt to learn a foreign language, one encounters many obstacles in grasping the target language quickly (BaSaeed, 2013). Syntactic, semantic, and phonological are part of these challenges, according to Mayor (2012). Yet, there are peculiarities in the grammar structure, tenses, adverbs, and the timing of speech that distinguish one language from another.

In grammatical terms, tense indicates when an action took place and allows learners to express whether an effort is completed, in progress, or the future tense. Noam Chomsky claims that natural speakers can employ their innate knowledge of grammar to construct sentences, yet acquiring a language requires cognitive processes since linguistic activity is something only humans have experienced. Tense is, thus, a crucial feature that EFL students need to master to become proficient writers and speakers. However, most students have a great deal of difficulty with the correct use of tenses. Teachers also report the problem of providing students with adequate guidance on this aspect of grammar. However, learning tense can be particularly challenging for those learning English as a foreign language.

However, present perfect tense difficulties are among the most noticeable obstacles to learning a foreign language (Matter, 2001). Arab students of English have a hard time employing the present perfect because it does not allow them to use a verb tense that is naturally harmonious with English. Educators and scholars agree that Arabic language students often substitute the simple past for the present perfect tense when learning English because of the difficulties in understanding the present perfect tense (Fromkin et al., 2007). As a result, harmful Arabic interference affects how well Arab students may learn English by prompting them to search for a tense equivalent in their native tongue. Arabic speakers learning English are likely accustomed to borrowing and adapting the form and function of Arabic into English due to the absence of the present perfect in Arabic. Hence, native language interference hinders English proficiency. As a result, learners frequently make awful mistakes because they rely excessively on their first language. In addition, Arab English learners at all levels make this error. Due to the differences in verb tenses between English and Arabic, Sabra (2020) believes that one of the main reasons for errors is the inappropriate use of the interference of the student's mother tongue.

Abi Samra (2003) asserts that English language presents a range of tenses, including perfect (past and present), simple (past and present), and progressive. They deduce that the substantial disparity between the two systems leads Arab students to substitute the simple past for the present perfect tense. On the other hand, Arabic distinguishes between two tenses: the perfect, which describes an activity in the past that has already occurred, and the imperfect, which represents an ongoing action at present or implies future occurrence. These aspects are not relevant to the duration of an endeavour but rather to its completion.

A common cause of mother-language interference is a failure to grasp the functional and semantic nuances of the present perfect tense (Cakir, 2011; Cowan, 2008; Parrot, 2010; Ryding, 2005). Huddleston and Pullum (2002) assert that Arab EFL speakers either avoid or incorrectly employ the present perfect tense in favour of the simpler simple past. They said students do not realise that the present perfect tense is a hybrid of the present and the past (Jabak, 2007). When students do not know how to use a grammatical characteristic, it is often because of the influence of their first language. Consequently, they cannot think of a good analogy for the idea, and even if they know how to utilise the present perfect tense, they often get it wrong. This avoidance is due to a familiarity gap between the simple past and the present perfect tense (Cakir, 2011; Harmer, 2007; Leech, 2002). Moreover, Wahyuningtyas and Bram (2018) claim that learners of English as a Foreign Language keep comparing English to their mother tongue as they learn English. Learners learn grammar faster and easier if it is like their mother language.

Students of Arabic will have a similar level of difficulty grasping English present perfect tense. This challenge arises because Arabic does not distinguish between completed past activities and completed past acts that relate to the simple present rather than the present perfect, as is used in English.

As a result, Arabic students learning English will substitute the simple past tense for the present perfect tense.

A. *Related Studies*

The difficulties Arab students face when using the present perfect have been investigated and documented at length in several publications.

Misuse of the present perfect is due to several issues, including the influence of the mother tongue, a lack of perfect tenses in Arabic, the methods used in teaching grammar, and a failure to grasp the grammatical and semantic structures of the tense. Several researchers have investigated the characteristics that affect the frequency with which the usage of the present perfect.

When students of a foreign language encounter a structure they don't recognise and often draw parallels to something they already know from their native language. Albalawi (2016) studied the errors committed by students at Arab universities that can be linked to influence from the students' mother tongues when composing a piece of writing consisting of 200–250-word numbers. The findings of the investigations led the researchers to conclude that one of these mistakes was in the use of English tenses since Arabic got in the way when they were writing in English. Similarly, Jubran (2021) examined Jordanian female university students' errors in writing English paragraphs. The study found that employing English tenses was one of the problems that emerged while attempting to write in English because Arabic interfered with their ability to write in English. Likewise, Cakir (2011) in his study notes that native Turkish speakers' interference with English remains a problem for Turkish students.

Similarly, Almuhammadi (2020) demonstrated that EFL educators consider grammar a cornerstone of the English language teaching system. He adds that grammar plays a significant role in learning to use EFL correctly and accurately. However, he adds that teachers must develop relevant practical skills for teaching grammar effectively.

Along the same line, Sholeha et al. (2020) and Hazzaa (2021) in their studies concluded that the absence of the present perfect tense in specific languages, such as the Arabic language causes difficulties and limits foreign language learners to use it. They added that those learners used English tense according to their understanding of their mother language.

According to Atashian and Al-Bahri's (2018) research, the incorrect usage of the perfect tense is the most common error, specifically the ones related to the present perfect. The researchers concluded that Arabs learning English as a second language struggle with the perfect tense because it doesn't have a similar verb in Arabic. Instead, it is often confused with the past simple.

B. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it examines how students' first language affects their foreign language grammar. Students will improve their command of the present perfect tense by highlighting how crucial it is to identify and address core issues. For example, Jordanian students use the present perfect in a way that is not the norm. So, teachers of English as a second language of the Arab world learn about this knowledge gap, shed light on it, draw attention to its importance, and develop new ideas and ways to deal with the possible reasons why people use the present perfect and other tenses incorrectly. Also, the study provides teachers with an instructional program based on steps to help EFL learners perform better in English grammar.

III. METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a descriptive method, and the data were students' initial sentences, which showed severe problems in utilising the present perfect during writing in English. According to Brog and Gall (1990) and Cohen et al. (2011), the descriptive method allows analysis and explanation and provides a complete and precise description. Moreover, the illustrative method allows the researchers to portray the statistical data through percentages displayed in different graphs.

The study sample comprised twenty female students in the seventh grade in one of the government schools in Jordan; all are native speakers of Arabic. All the participants were from the same age range (13-14) years old and had been studying English for at least seven years.

To diagnose the problem of the present perfect in Jordanian English writing, the researchers created an instrument consisting of a single question and statement, each incorporating present perfect adverbs (such as "already" and "so far"). The researchers give the instrument to the students to assist them in constructing their sentences. The aim of giving them the question and the statement was to check their initial knowledge of using the present perfect correctly in written production. The researchers used these sentences as the study's tool. The followings are the question and the statement:

-What have you already done to pursue your goal in life?

-Describe what you have accomplished so far to make your parents proud.

Then the researchers analysed the errors of students' sentences in using the present perfect tense as they produced them. The participants provided 100 sentences with many present perfect errors. As a second correction, one university professor read the sentences and agreed upon the first correction. A schoolteacher did the third correction and approved the standard errors from the three correction stages. To calculate the percentage, the researchers used a percentage calculator (*Percentage Calculator*, n.d.). The following are some of the common errors taken from students' mistakes.

I have help them in the garden.

I did my home chores already.

I have not skip school never.
 I have not disrespect my teachers lately.
 I am been honest always.
 I just got high marks recently.
 I helped my friend all the time.

As seen from the above sentences written by students at their initial level, they struggle with verbs that indicate time. They sometimes fail to employ an auxiliary to specify whether the activity is occurring now or in the past. Also, their sentences include errors in producing present perfect more than the simple past.

IV. RESULTS

After correcting the students' sentences, the correction results revealed that most participants (85%) had problems using the present perfect tense, whereas (15%) correctly produced correct present perfect sentences.

As seen from Table 1 that 85% of students from the whole sample produced the present perfect incorrectly. 15% only accomplished forming the correct present perfect sentences.

TABLE 1
 PERCENTAGE OF CORRECT VS INCORRECT PRESENT PERFECT USAGE

Tense	Percentage
The incorrect present perfect tense	85%
correct present perfect	15%

Table 2 indicates that 67% of students did not utilise the adverbials associated with the present perfect tense (yet, ever, recently, never, already, lately, and just). In contrast, they used the adverbial of the current perfect properly rated (18%) only.

TABLE 2
 PRESENT PERFECT USE WITHOUT/WITH ADVERBS

Tense	Percentage
Absence of present perfect adverbs	67%
Using present perfect adverbs	18%

Table 3 reveals that 75%, which formed the most significant percentage, of the participants replaced the simple past instead of present perfect, 15% used correct present perfect, and 10% used unknown tense.

TABLE 3
 SIMPLE PAST AND OTHER TENSES INSTEAD OF PRESENT PERFECT

Tense	Percentage
Simple past replaces present perfect	75%
Proper present perfect	15%
Unknown tense	10%

Table 4 indicates that 75% of students used the incorrect form of participle verb when using the present perfect, and 70% of the participants substituted the past tense of the verb instead of the participle. On the other hand, 65% failed to use the auxiliary subject agreement when writing a present perfect tense.

TABLE 4
 TYPES OF ERRORS IN FORMING THE PRESENT PERFECT

Type of errors	Percentage
Past participle of the verb	75%
Past tense of the verb instead of the participle	70%
Incorrect use of subject-auxiliary agreement	65%

V. DISCUSSION

English tenses can function independently or with other tenses and additional aspects. For instance, the present perfect tense combines the present tense as a verb with the perfect tense aspect. This tense is one of the hardest English verb tenses to understand because there is no precise translation or equivalence in other languages. Because of its grammatical complexity, richness of semantic qualities, and theoretical justifications, this merge of tenses and aspects creates significant challenges for Arab students. Regarding the Arabic language, the two main tenses are present and past, and there is no equivalence of the present perfect in the Arabic language. Although this tense does not exist in Arabic, students cannot avoid using it in English. The participants provided sentences with many incorrect uses of the present perfect tense. The nonexistence of the present perfect tense in Arabic explains the highest ratio in Table 1. Table 1 shows that 85% of the participants do not utilise the present perfect, yet the lowest percentage (15%) employed the present perfect correctly.

Unlike English, Arabic has only two basic tenses, so students use the past or the present instead of the present perfect because they rely on the common tenses in both languages (present and past). For example, one of the participants' examples of the present perfect *I have love my parents already*, and *I loved my school since I was in grade 2*. They replaced the simple past or present tense because they could not demonstrate the differences between their mother and English languages. Surprisingly, the students admit that the present perfect is the hardest tense to use in the appropriate situation.

The present perfect tense is difficult for Jordanian students to use correctly, and they frequently do so for various reasons. One of these reasons is that the Arabic language lacks a present perfect equivalent, so the mother tongue interferes with finding one from the Arabic language, which affects how well they learn the present perfect (Al-Jouhani, 2019; Cowen, 2008; Murad & Khalil, 2015). Thus, the strong influence of the mother tongue is the major contributor to the incorrect use of the present perfect. Hazzaa (2021) and Rizka (2017) confirmed that ESL students' usage of the past tense in their native language affects their ability to employ the present perfect tense in English correctly.

These results support the findings of the study of Sholeha et al. (2020), who stated that the absence of a perfect tense in specific languages creates difficulties for English language learners who are native speakers of these languages.

Another reason that could contribute to the problem of the present perfect is the confusion of understanding the meaning and function of the present perfect tense. Cakir (2011) and Parrot (2010) assert that Arab learners avoid the present perfect because they do not recognise that the present perfect connects past events with the present rather than a past or present tense. Jabak (2007) and Leech (2002) assert that due to this misunderstanding of the meaning of the present perfect, students fail to use the present perfect correctly and avoid using it consciously. Finally, teachers are part of the problem of using present perfect because they don't give students enough opportunities to practice the perfect tense. Unfortunately, present perfect tense is typically taught in schools theoretically, with teachers illustrating its grammatical qualities through carefully chosen and customised examples. As a result, Students who are taught the present perfect tense in this manner will acquire the form but not the context. Also, students' ability to compose coherent and error-free sentences may not reflect their performance on a standardised grammar test. According to Nassaji and Fotos (2004), language learners who employ the grammar-translation strategy cannot communicate effectively in the target language. They added that teachers tend to favour the grammar-translation strategy because it allows them to teach the grammatical rules quickly and provides ample opportunity for practice using drills. Also, most teachers direct their students to look for time signals to help them select the correct tense.

As documented from correcting students' initial level examples, most errors occurred in the present perfect tense. The remarkable and surprising observing error regarding the present perfect is the absence of using the present perfect adverbials. Table 2 shows that using the adverbial of the present perfect properly rated (18%) while (67%) of students did not employ the adverbials (already, lately, ever, never, just, recently, and yet) linked with present perfect tense. In the present perfect, these adverbs are usually used in sentences to show the regularity or continuance of an action or activity. Consequently, this leads the researchers to conclude that students are not proficient with the present perfect tense, often confuse it with other verb tenses, and do not rely on its adverbials. Surprisingly, they trace these adverbials when identifying the type of the sentences. Usually, they rely on these keywords, yet they cannot master and use them in writing. Learning the many different verb forms in English is another challenging language component. The verbs in English have various forms by changing the verb to present, past, or perfect or adding some auxiliaries, such as have, has, will, etc. The incorrect usage of verb tenses leads to inaccurate representations of events in a foreign language.

Another challenge of the present perfect derived from students' sentences is the substitution of the simple past simple past for the present perfect. Table 3 shows that 75% of the participants used the simple past over the present perfect, yet 15% employed the correct present perfect. Unfortunately, the rest of the participants 10% used unspecified tenses. Some students may get the past and present perfect tense mixed up since the concept of the past tense is the same in both Arabic and English and this mixed-up help in explaining why this happens.

However, the present perfect tense does not exist in Arabic, so this is why students stopped utilising the perfect tense and started using the past tense. Such unusual uses of the present perfect tense may be attributable to language transfer, and this emphasises the idea that the target language (English language) inherits some features from the mother tongue. The higher the dissimilarity between the languages, the more errors result. Similarly, the study by Bulut (2011) concluded that the Turkish language, like the Arabic language, does not have a present perfect or similar tense, so students tend to substitute the present perfect by using the simple past. Along the same line, the results of the study of Nozadze (2012) attributed the problem of the present perfect replacement to the first language interference and methods of instruction.

Even after years of studying English, most students still mishandle the present perfect tense. Teachers contribute to the problem by providing insufficient practice of the present perfect tense while explaining its structure only by providing them with drills. Similarly, based on the studies of Abu-Joudeh et al. (2013) and Al-Jouhani (2019), they concluded that the nonexistence of the present perfect tense in Arabic forced learners to use different functions to convey it. They added that their first language limited their ability to use the present perfect; furthermore, they concluded that the students could identify the tense though they could not use the correct form. In addition, the students found it challenging to choose the proper verb forms connected to the tense, such as whether to use simple, past, or past participle.

As shown in the above tables, the correct usage of the present tense does not go beyond 15%, which means that most participants suffer when using this tense. The present perfect tense is difficult for both instructors to teach and students to master. Students of EFL should know how to distinguish between the present perfect and the past tense.

After diagnosing the participants' problem of the tense under investigation, the researchers suggested an instructional guide consisting of five steps to aid teachers and students in overcoming this dilemma. The steps included in this guide are as follows:

A. Step One

The teacher explains the purpose of both tenses (simple past and present perfect) by writing their respective structures and functions on the whiteboard. Then, he provides numerous examples of the past tense and present-perfect to the students and writes the answers on the whiteboard. Writing these questions and the answers assists students in grasping the meaning and realising the difference in using the two tenses.

To help the students use the perfect tense and form, the researchers provide two videos of both tenses under investigation. The following are two videos on distinguishing between past and present perfect.

- Present Perfect vs Simple Past (Easy Rules in a Cartoon) (Logus, 2022).
- Present Perfect vs Past Simple | English Conversation About Life Experiences (English Panda, 2021).

B. Step Two

In this step, the teacher evokes students' examples. These examples are past events and events that started in the past and continued to the present.

To help the students, the teacher writes these questions on the whiteboard and the answers to use in the third step. Some examples of these questions are:

- How long have you lived in this city? Present perfect
- How long have you studied English Literature? Present perfect
- Who was your first friend at school? Simple past
- What did you eat yesterday? Simple past

C. Step Three

In this step, the teacher asks students to identify each sentence's subject and verb about the sentences in step two. Then the teacher asks the students to change the verbs and the topics to construct new sentences.

D. Step Four

Now, students are familiar with the function, form, and how to make sentences using simple past and present perfect and can differentiate between them. The teacher asks students in pairs to ask and answer questions using the two tenses. The following are examples of the student's answers:

Student 1: what did you eat yesterday?

Student 2: I ate an egg and bread.

Student 1: What other cities have you visited in Jordan?

Student 2: I have seen Jerash and Irbid.

E. Step Five

In the last step, the teacher gives the students a review worksheet on using simple past and present perfect tense. Then all participants must recorrect the sentences of their initial levels.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is common knowledge that Arabic and English grammar are not entirely interchangeable. Students learning English as a second language will continue to make grammatical errors, particularly with tenses because this is part of the learning process. This study seeks to identify students' difficulties with using the present perfect tense by analysing their sentences. Students believe this tense is more challenging to grasp and employ in conversation than basic tenses. Since students rarely engage this tense in English writing, they struggle when called upon to do so and cannot utilise it or recognise when it is appropriate.

This difficulty is due to the nonexistence of this tense in Arabic, which increases the problem of applying the present perfect correctly in context. This error causes the mother tongue to intervene to find a comparable tense of the present perfect in Arabic through translation (Murad & Khalil, 2015). Since the past tense is the closest tense to the present perfect in Arabic, this interference and translation are seen as a barrier to learning it. As a result, misunderstanding the present perfect causes inappropriate usage in the proper context. Unfortunately, teachers are making this problem worse because they only give a few drills as practice for the present perfect when they explain how it works. However, teachers need to be aware of how to prevent students from repeating the same errors and how to offer them effective alternatives. Teachers must concentrate on the tenses, like the present perfect tense, that cause the most misunderstanding among their students to help them to get more comfortable with the tense form and application. Also, teachers might direct their attention to situations in which the tense is typically employed and provide a range of

exercises that integrate these abilities. According to Garrido and Romero (2012), the prevalence of errors in particular tenses shows that students require assistance correctly utilising tenses' properties. They recommend adding extra comparison tasks for tenses with the most similar qualities and objectives to assist students in appreciating the importance of the component.

However, students need to spend more time practising the most challenging things because the inadequate opportunity for practising the present perfect determines low achievement in grasping this tense. Moreover, they must put more effort into practising all tenses in oral and written forms and various contexts.

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Sereen M. Jubran was born in Amman- Jordan, and she got her bachelor's degree in English Language from Al -Yarmouk University -Jordan in 1984. She earned her master's in teaching English from the University of Jordan in Amman- Jordan 2002. She got her PhD in Teaching English Language from Amman Arab University Amman-Jordan in 2011. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Princess Alia University College/ Al-Balqa Applied University. Her research interests are mainly in teaching writing – Teaching English Skills, Writing research in English. She has taught several English skills courses such as Paragraph Writing- Essay Writing- Writing Research in English- Reading- Listening.

Sura Mohammad Khrais is a professor of English literature at Al-Balqa Applied University. Her research interests are in World Literature, Feminist Literature, and Post Colonial Literature.