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Difficulties in Learning English Grammar Tenses: A Case Study of Arab EFL Students at Benghazi University

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Abstract

This study aims to study the difficulties of learning English grammar that English as a foreign language (EFL) students faced while learning English grammar tenses. The research aimed to identify grammatical difficulties in order to provide a contribution to help EFL teachers to identifying grammatical errors made by their students. To collect data for this research we used semi-structured interviews with four students from fourth year of English language department at Benghazi University. The interviews were supported with text contains a list of verbs to observe the students' knowledge about tenses. The study showed that most of the students have problems with English grammar and do not know how to apply the grammar rules. In other words, Arab students have a lack of knowledge about practicing the English grammar because of the first language interference.

Keywords: Grammar, tenses, teaching, theory, practice

1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language requires a good knowledge of its grammar since understanding the structure of any language might help in reaching fluency. Mart, (2013) stated that mastering the grammar of the target language is important for successful learning of that language. Ellis, (2003) also argued that tenses as an aspect of learning EFL plays a central role in language acquisition because grammar instruction plays an important role in learner's acquisition of high accuracy and fluency in target language. From this perspective, tense might be viewed as "the grammatical feature of verbs relating to time" (Declerk, 2006, p.96). English verbs distinctive from the present and past tenses; the so called future tense does not have a distinctive form but it is expressed by an auxiliary model plus a present tense form of the verb. This is to say, English has two tenses and a syntactic structure to express future. Tenses help learners understand the correspondence between the form of the verb and the concept of time. Comrie (1976) defines time as the feature of the

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verb system in which is the dimension in which action occur or a non spatial continuum in which events take place in apparently irreversible succession.

Parrot (2000), argues that, the number of tense forms that can express time in English when trying to choose the appropriate form may confuse learners. Time is an extra linguistic category, for example, it exists independently of language. Tense is a linguistic concept. By tense learners understand that language has different verb forms corresponding to the different ways in which a speaker can locate the actualization of a given situation in time (Declerk, 2006). More specifically, it refers to the role of specific verb forms in a given language to locate situations in time. This is to say, English language has three main verb tenses: present, past and future. These three main tenses are divided into four aspects: the simple, progressive, perfect and perfect progressive. On the other hand, in Arabic there is no distinction between simple and present perfect verb as the case in English (Khalil, 2000). Arabic has only a past or perfect tense, which signifies an action completed at the time of speaking. As a result, the Arabic learners might have a difficulty in encountering the past time in English.

2. Statement of the Problem

The differences between theory and practice in applying English grammatical rules are the main concern of this study.

Consequently, this study is concerned with the difficulties in learning grammar of English language as a foreign language (FL) to the Libyan EFL learners, in particular, EFL students in Benghazi University - Kufrah. EFL students might have a good background about English grammar but there is a problem of applying the grammar rules.

3. Research Question

What are the difficulties that encountered by Arab Libyan EFL learners while learning English grammar?

4. Objectives of the Study

Diagnosing the differences between knowledge and practicing of grammar by Arab Libyan EFL learners.

5. Methods of Data Collection

To gain a full picture about the way of learning English grammar, semi-structured interviews were used with four Arab EFL students. Beside the semi-structured interviews the data collection was supported with a text contains list of underline verbs (See appendix list). We used it to ask students about the tenses of the underline verbs to know their knowledge and background about English grammar. Consequently, the interviewed students were asked about ten verbs to check their levels in English grammar, so reading the text was the first thing to do. After reading and answering the questions, the next step was to take notes on the kinds

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of errors found. This led us to group the data and answer the research question.

6. Data findings and discussion

As mentioned earlier, candidates were requested to read and analyse a text adapted from 'About Language', Scott Thrunbury (1997), which consists a number of verb phrases. In addition, we will discuss each potential difficulty for our learners may encounter in studying that form.

The verb share is a present simple tense. The Present simple tells you what is going on right now. The verb provides the reader with an information about the subject. The four interviewed students found it easy to know that the verb 'share' is a present simple because as S2 stated "this text is as story so the story begins with present simple because there is no any signal that tell us this sentence is talking about other tenses". However, the interviewed students was confused whether the verb is an event, state or habit in context.

The second example in the text is I have had which is present perfect. It expresses an activity or event completed in the past but with some relationship to the present (O'Dwyer, 2006). The interviewed learners confused about the present tense with past reference and with the verbs and auxiliaries that cannot distinguish the time.

As stated earlier, learners' first language affected the way of learning FL grammar. For example, S2 argued, "our mother tongue is Arabic and there is some differences between English and Arabic so we face some problems with learning English grammar because there is some rules difference from Arabic rules. For example, "present perfect, all the other simple tenses sometimes we use them in wrong way because we are speak in Arabic more than English".

The verb bought is in a past simple form. The simple past presents an action as having completed at some point in the past (Woods, 2006). It donates an event verb with definite end. And was made redundant are in a past passive voice, this verb is a result the previous verb bought and it is in the same tense but the later is in passive voice. Both past tense with present reference and passive construction caused confusion to our participants where object of the verb becomes subject of the sentence. This complicated structure of these verbs caused confusion for the candidates. For example, students 3 and 4 stated, "present simple and past continues. Continues contains -ing. It is past but not continues, past perfect".

I'd always been is a past perfect, which is used to talk about what happened before a point in the past. It is often when we report what people has said, believed or

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thought. In addition, the verb *did* is a past simple (we referred to it in the previous paragraph). For example, S2 stated that "it is a past perfect because the structure *had is a past and been is perfect but always I do not know it is mentioned to what*". Our learners was confused in the sequential contrasting of past time which is defined by the context and which event occurred first.

The present perfect progressive in *'ve been doing* is used to show that something started in the past and has continued up till now. This confused our learners when the present tense with past reference where the incompleteness of activities started in the past and continuing into the present.

The verb *'ve finished* is a perfect aspect, which formed with *have* as an auxiliary verb, together with the past participle of the main verb (Jackson and Stockwell, 1996). It refers to unfinished action or it finished at the time of speaking. Our learners was confused between *have + past participle* and *had + past participle* when they found the verb form in the past and past participle are similar (e.g. *finished*).

I'll leave and *take up* the form of the verb in present form + the auxiliary *will* which express the future. This caused confusion about predictive use of future and present simple used for future.

The interviewed students clearly stated that they have problem with applying the grammar rules. According to their answers, the problems were caused by the way learning grammar:

S1 "How to apply the rules that is the difficult that I find"

S2 "I cannot apply the tenses"

S3 " maybe I have some problems in grammar which is tenses not all the tenses but for example the very easy past simple , perfect , continues but the past perfect continues it is very difficult because it has a lot of structures "

S4 " there is problem like using present perfect and present perfect continues I cannot use them in the spoken language it is a problem for me " .

These findings showed that there is no relationship between the students' knowledge and applying the grammar rules. In other words, the majority of the students know the structures of tenses, but do not know how to apply these tenses.

As stated earlier, in Arabic there is no distinction between present perfect and past simple. According to the students answers present perfect tense causes confusion, because they do not know when exactly to use it:

S1 " I say it is easy but when I apply I do not know what is it " .

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S2 " It is easy to study , to save the structure , to know if this sentence is present perfect or not but it is difficult to apply and to know the cause why you use it ".

S3 "Present perfect is very easy it is subject + verb or it is has / have + past participle ".

This is clear when the students were asked to identify the verb "have finished". S1, for example, said, "it is past perfect because 'have' is used in perfect and 'finished' used in the past", while S3 said the verb "I have had "is past perfect continues according to the form of the tense.

To sum up, it is clear that learning English grammar is difficult for Libyan EFL learners. This was noticed from their answers, which were completely different from what they said. Distinguishing between tenses considered one of the most prominent problems that EFL learners faced. For instance, they do not know how to differentiate between past and past perfect tenses because of the mother tongue language interference. Studying grammar of English contains theoretical and practical sides. Students can memorize the rules, but their main difficulty was in applying them. The traditional ways of teaching grammar might not help students to learn grammar rules and could not be workable to advance their levels. Finally, learning grammar as a

second language is not easy because it is an acquired language.

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Appendix 1:

1 Alison Wall and her partner Simon share a small, suburban house with two cats and a dog. I 've had this house for two years. I bought it after I was made redundant after the

stockmarket crash. I 'd always been really cynical about people who did gardening and

home improvements- but that 's exactly what we 've been doing. Simon's very handy

5 with a hammer- he likes smashing things up. As soon as we 've finished with the

Carpentry I 'll leave him and take up with a plumber.

(Adapted from 'About Language', Scott Thornbury, CUP 1997, p73).