
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Arabic First-Language Interference in English Tense Usage: A Critical Review of Tense and Aspect Difficulties among Arab EFL Learners

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| ABSTRACT

The present study aims to demonstrate Arabic first-language (L1) interference and its effect on the use of English tenses by Arabic-English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. It integrates the theoretical and empirical literature on language transfer, contrastive analysis, interlanguage, and error analysis to examine how tense and aspect remain hot and interesting topics among Arab learners in speech and writing. A critical narrative approach has been adopted for the present study to achieve its objective. The findings reveal that different issues and challenges face the Arab EFL learners. It does not think that the situation can be reduced to a simple rule that says Arabic has fewer tenses than English. Rather, there are differences between Arabic and English in the conceptualization of temporality. The English language primarily uses grammaticalized tenses and aspects with auxiliary verbs, and there are minor differences between the past, present, and past events. Arabic, on the other hand, tends to allocate time among the verb's aspect, contextual time indicators, particles, and adverbial clauses. Such cross-linguistic incongruities result in common mistakes in the use of simple past and simple present, present perfect, present progressive, the omission of the copula and auxiliary verbs, and the mixing up of forms and reference to time by learners. Finally, the study also shows that not all tense errors are interlingual. They can also be intralingual, resulting from overgeneralization and classroom instruction that taught students to memorize forms rather than discourses.

| KEYWORDS

Arabic-English transfer; tense and aspect; Arab EFL-learners; interlanguage, negative transfer; grammar teaching.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

In applied linguistics, the role of the first language in foreign and second-language learning remains a topic of debate. Although the concept of transfer in early behaviorist explanations was treated as interference, later literature showed that cross-linguistic influence is a more multifaceted phenomenon that can be either facilitative, constraining, selective, or developmental (Lado, 1957; Odlin, 1989; Selinker, 1972). Tense and aspect are revealing areas, especially for Arabic and English-language students, because English recognizes aspect and continuity through attributes of commencement and series within a system of formal restrictions that are not well-grounded in Arabic (Ryding, 2005; Mudhsh, 2021). Subsequently, Arab EFL speakers can also speak with utterances that

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can be grammatically incorrect despite the utterances potentially making sense at the message level, especially when they discuss the past, describe habitual behavior, and distinguish between closed and open actions (Ridha, 2012; Altheneyan and Boayrid, 2019; Alzahrani, 2020). It is not simply pedagogical but also linguistic. In classrooms, tenses are commonly taught as forms to memorize, whereas the tense that actually applies in practice is determined by grammar, discourse situation, lexical dimension, time adverbials, and the speaker's intent (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2022). English has some contrasts that learners should be aware of and address. In this case, learners are to provide inflection and auxiliary verbs. Arabic normally conveys the idea of temporality through aspectual contrasts, discourse sequencing, discourse particles, and contextual inclination and pragmatic interpretation (Ryding, 2005; Mudhsh, 2021).

The concept that pre-linguistics existed and this determines what one subsequently learns is fundamental in second language learning. The contrastive view held that any contrast between the first and target languages is most likely to pose a challenge, but when there is a structural similarity, the likelihood is that positive transfer will be reinforced (Lado, 1957). Although later the contrastive analysis was criticized as a form of prediction, the underlying principle holds: cross-linguistic differences matter, especially when students are required to convey meaning in a different language (L1) (Odlin, 1989). The work Corder carried out on learners' errors altered the course of the field, and it is no longer possible to consider errors as failures. These errors were instead seen as being a sign of a new system (Corder, 1967). The second concept is interlanguage, which was first proposed by Selinker and further developed by him, who explained that the language of the Learner is an elaborate, developing complex influenced by the first language, the second language, communicative strategies, and learning strategies (Selinker, 1972). There is a need to differentiate interlingual and intralingual errors in this topic. They are interlingual errors that have entered English through the use of Arabic constructions, semantics, or discourse patterns. Intralingual errors occur through overgeneralization, partial learning, inadequate examination of English forms, or simplification of the target language itself (Odlin, 1989; Alzahrani, 2020). Practically speaking, in addition to being mixed, learners' errors are not confined to such a practice to the extent that it is important to employ a narrow interference approach.

It is worth mentioning that this study does not claim to cover all publications on Arab EFL grammar learning, nor does it provide a formal meta-analysis. Instead, it comments on the excellent theoretical and empirical studies directly related to Arabic-English transfer, tense and aspect, verb morphology, learner errors, and the research implications for teaching Arab learners English (Odlin, 1989; Altheneyan and Boayrid, 2019). It also highlights studies that explicitly address tense-related issues in Arabic or offer conceptual support for explaining the concerned issue.

The literature is both classic theory in the field of second language acquisition, contrastive analysis, and interlanguage, and more recent, including studies of Arab students in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Palestine, etc. (Ridha, 2012; Btoosh, 2019; Alzahrani, 2020; Garra-Alloush and Kettanie-AbuMock, 2023; Alamir, 2025). This study reviews the role of Arabic L1 interference in the use of English tenses by Arab EFL students. It introduces the most significant issues in theory, outlines the key features of the English and the Arabic systems of tense and aspect, generalizes all significant issues about the problem of tense difficulty, which is mentioned in the literature, and offers pedagogical recommendations to be implemented to achieve a more effective training (David, 1998).

Tense and Aspect in English.

English has a concept of temporality that entails a strict organization of interactions between tense and aspect. Simply, tense places a situation relative to the time it was uttered, and aspect provides a time frame for the situation (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2022). Not only simple present and simple past, but also progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive, and future-time expressions like will, be going to, the present progressive, and the simple present of events planned for a specific time should be taught to learners. Simple present is used to describe habits and everyday truths; present progressive (present continuing or going) for present conditions; simple past for past events already achieved; present perfect for past events already achieved; past perfect for events that have already been achieved in the past. Such distinctions require not only chronology but also a perspective that learners need to remember. Discourse and lexis also determine the tense to be used in English. Moreover, English has uninflected morphology and auxiliaries, such as the third-person plural -s, irregular and regular past-tense forms, be and have, and do. Among Arab learners, it also suggests concurrent semantic, morphological, syntactic, and even discourse-based learning of tense (Btoosh, 2019; Alamir, 2025).

Tense and Aspect in Arabic.

There is no time encoding in Arabic as there is in English. Ryding (2005) and Mudhsh (2021) tend to view Arabic grammar traditionally, in terms of contrasts between perfective and imperfective verb forms, rather than as a system of distinct tenses like English. Depending on the situation, the perfective expresses a complete action, and the imperfective expresses an incomplete, habitual, repetitive, continuous, modal, or future-oriented action. The temporality of Arabic is more flexible than that of the verb forms. It can often be grounded in discourse, particles, adverbials, and pragmatic interpretation. It does not imply that Arabic cannot convey future, present, or past ideas. Rather, the different meanings are exchanged in various directions.

The imperfective system will be useful for indicating future sense, along with the particle(s) *sa-* or *sawfa*; context and words are also worth considering. Connotation that they are similar to English: perfect may be preceded by either particle combinations, such as *qad*, or context. Another interesting similarity is that Arabic lacks the auxiliary structure found in English. This misunderstanding is one of the reasons most learners fail to use the language, such as the inability to use the auxiliary *be* in a progressive structure and to use the wrong *have* in a perfect structure. The fact that the Arabic logic of time that works in perfect structures with Arabic is applied word-for-word in English (Ridha, 2012; Alzahrani, 2020). The mixing of the Arabic language with the use of English tenses. Arabic interference affects English tense usage at various levels. The semantic level is a learner's ability to distinguish between English tenses and the Arabic past tense. On the morphological level, they can either omit or miss or use the inflectional endings as well as an auxiliary. On the syntactic level, they can result in the structurally incomplete constructions of tenses. On the discourse level, they might choose a tense that seems appropriate in an isolated sentence, but cannot be used in a narrative or expository context (Ridha, 2012; Btoosh, 2019; Alzahrani, 2020). One of the problems that continues to recur is the usage of the present perfect. The English present perfect of verbs is widely used to indicate a past event, but it does this to refer to something true in the present, or to a time when there is no particular adverbial specifying a past time. The majority of Arab students replace the contrast in English with a simple past, as the contrast in the Arabic language is not coded (Btoosh, 2019; Mudhsh & Laskar, 2021). A second issue is that of the progressive aspect. Since Arabic is not related to English in terms of the grammaticalization of ongoingness and temporary activity, learners may be under- or overusing the present progressive form, or even using it where English would use the simple form (Mudhsh and Laskar, 2021). The third interfering area is auxiliaries and copulas, as at this stage, learners replace *be* or *have* because they have not necessarily internalized the grammatical mechanism that requires the obligatory expression of tense and aspect in English (Ridha, 2012; Garra-Alloush and Kettanie-AbuMock, 2023).

Research methodology

The present study has adopted a critical narrative approach to achieve its objective. A critical narrative approach is appropriate because the literature shows that the sample size, design, genre, and target tense types differ in ways that cannot be readily compared using strict statistical methods. At the same time, a narrative review allows for the explanation and synthesis of pedagogical concepts at the levels of linguistic theory and research in classes. In this study, the review was purposive rather than exhaustive. The selected studies were directly relevant to issues in Arabic–English tense-aspect contrast, errors in tense use, and related topics. The present study does not claim to cover all studies, but it delivers an informed thematic synthesis that is well-suited to identifying the main patterns, conceptual gaps, and priorities for further research.

Frequent tense-related problems in the literature.

Several issues are associated with the tense in the literature. Tense and aspect continue to be issues in the production of written and spoken language, as results from studies of Arab EFL learners indicate. Various studies have been conducted in this area; for instance, studies conducted by Iraqis in the past found that negative transfer in Arabic played a prominent role in causing writing mistakes and that errors concentrated on grammatical features such as tense, articles, prepositions, and word order (Ridha, 2012). Other studies that followed up and reviewed also summarized the same, finding that Arabic student research multivariately influenced students' learning (Altheneyan and Boayrid, 2019). A study of an Arab L2 academic writing corpus found that L1 grammar significantly restricted the simple past and the perfective and imperfective forms of verb use, as well as the interpretation of verb lexical meaning (Btoosh, 2019). The results of the analysis of EFL students in Yemen indicated that aspectual categories are more precise at higher levels of university, yet the existing perfect is especially difficult (Mudhsh and Laskar, 2021). Research among Saudi undergraduates has determined that tense errors are linked to interlingual and intralingual issues, but intralingual interference produced more errors on average (Alzahrani, 2020). More recent research on spoken past-tense performance among Saudi students found that students could report past events with partial control but did not achieve full accuracy, particularly with irregular verb sets and explicit tense-marking patterns (Alamir, 2025).

Sources Beyond L1 Transfer

Arabic interference causes various issues and challenges in language learning; however, a sufficient cause must be identified regarding non-transfer factors. One of such factors is pedagogical sequencing. Most EFL textbooks teach tenses in a unitary model; in other words, for each tense, there is a formula to be learned and a repertoire of signal words. Without familiarity with the reasons as to why one form is more appropriate than another in real conversation, students can learn forms (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2022). The second is the poor language contact in most EFL settings. Limiting the input means that popular forms like the simple present and simple past are overused, while less common ones, such as the present perfect and past perfect, are at risk (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2022; Albelihi and Al-Ahdal, 2024). The situation can be exacerbated by the fact that, in assessment practices, learners might feel pressured, especially when exams are based on memorizing the rules rather than their application. Lastly, there are lexical issues and discourse organization. Verbs, time adverbials, text type, and narrative perspective all influence the choice of tenses. In situations where no special teaching is provided in these interfaces, the Learner will still be tempted to continue using single-form strategies, despite their awareness of the formal paradigm.

Conclusion

The use of tenses among Arab EFL learners is strongly influenced by first-language interference, and a transfer notion will not suffice to explain the situation at hand. It is not just that Arabic and English have varying numbers of forms that can be used, but also the grammaticalization of some relations involving time and aspectual perspective, the use of auxiliaries, and the sequence of discourse (Ryding, 2005; Mudhsh, 2021). Such varieties create predictable areas of weakness among learners, especially in the use of the present perfect and the progressive, past continuous, and the obligation to use the auxiliary (Btoosh, 2019; Alzahrani, 2020; Alamir, 2025). The tense mistakes of Arab learners, as observed in the literature reviewed here, are interlingual and intralingual. The key determinants are Arabic and English, especially those that convey tense-aspect contrasts (e.g., American English and Arabic) and those that lack direct equivalents in Arabic. The error pattern is also dictated by learner development, overgeneralization, limited input, and flawed pedagogical design (Albelihi and Al-Ahdal, 2024). In practical terms, Arab EFL students should be instructed in the visible, contrastive, and contextual meanings of time. The more tension-teaching continues without rote learning of rules, patterns, and formulas towards discourse-driven responses, the better students are situated to understand how English tenses are constructed and the motivation to apply them.

Pedagogical Implications

This study recommends that the teaching of tenses to Arab EFL students should not be restricted to formulaic grammar teaching. Firstly, a clearly contrastive strategy in which learners learn the differences between Arabic and English time, completion, continuity, and sequence should be chosen (Grami & Alzughaihi, 2012; Mudhsh, 2021). Second, the meanings of the tense-aspect in terms of context should be taken into consideration. The sentence-level exercises are helpful, but they should be complemented by activities that require learners to choose tenses in stories, dialogues, reporting through, and musings (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2022). Third, the auxiliary and inflexional marking should be given systematic consideration. Mistakes such as the omission of auxiliaries or the failure to control irregular verbs are considered minor in Arab EFL classrooms, whereas structural issues in English tense expression are considered more serious. Fourth, examples out of the corpus may be very effective. By contrasting students' actual errors with target-like usage, students can see distributional anomalies that can be constrained by rule elucidations (Btoosh, 2019; Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2022). Lastly, teacher education plays a vital part. Even the teachers in question might need a good linguistic understanding of tense and aspect, especially the difference between time reference and form.

Future Research Recommendations

Subsequent studies should examine tense learning among Arab EFL learners with a broader range of methodological approaches. The tense-aspect control and its development need to be studied, and more longitudinal research is needed to understand them better. Additional corpus-based research on different genres, like academic writing, email, classroom, spoken narrative, and verbal presentation, may also be carried out (Btoosh, 2019; Alamir, 2025). Future research should also focus on the background and learning of English in relation to the background of Arabic dialects, rather than treating all Arab learners as a homogeneous group (Ryding, 2005). The need is particularly in the intervention studies. Testing by researchers indicates that contrastive instructions, corpus-informed instruction, task-based teaching, or instruction based on focused written corrections contribute to significant improvement in Arab EFL (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2022; Albelihi and Al-Ahdal, 2024; Li, 2024).

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