



Problems in Conceptualizing the Timeline of Past Tense Aspects by Libyan Students

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Abstract

To master any language, grammatical rules are the backbone of producing accurate and meaningful messages. Past tense and aspect is one of the most important components of grammar that EFL learners and teachers should take into consideration. However, Libyan EFL learners encounter difficulties in forming and using past tense and aspect as a result of either their mother tongue influence or the lack of language competence which may lead to fossilization. On the other hand, teachers who teach English may not be aware of the importance of giving it right from the beginning. Therefore, teachers should give more emphasis on those areas of weaknesses in order to help students to master the past tense and aspect.

Key words: past tense, past aspect, EFL learners.

Introduction

Grammar is the system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence (Brown, 2001). Tense and aspect are apparently two major issues in language teaching (Bardovi-Haliy, 2000). Therefore, language experts or teachers try to focus on including tense and aspect in almost every English language syllabus. Yet, in many foreign language teaching classes, little effort is given to study the various factors that impede the learning process of

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tense and aspect. Thus, the majority of Libyan EFL learner face difficulties in dealing with past tense and aspect.

According to Corder (1971), the study of errors is important since errors permit the description of developmental stages in the acquisition of a second/ foreign language. For learners themselves, problems and errors are indispensable because the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn.

Corder (1981) stated that learners' errors are significant in three ways: first, they give information about the language a learner is using; second, they provide information on how the language is learnt and finally they provide information on the learner himself/herself since errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn.

Thus, this study aims to explore some difficulties that Libyan EFL learners are likely to face through their learning process concerning the form and use of past tense and aspect. This paper also studies the possible reasons or causes that might make these learners continue committing errors in those areas.

Defi

nition of terms

Tense

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) stated that tense is a verb-based method used to indicate the time and sometimes the continuation or completeness of an action or state in relation to the time of speaking.

Aspect

Aspect 'concerns the different perspectives which a speaker can take and express with regard to the temporal course of some event, action, process, etc.'(Klein, 1994, p.16).

Greenbuam and Quirk (1990) defined tense and aspect as follows:

Tense is a grammatical category related to time of the situation. It is realized by the inflected form of the verb. There are two main tenses in English: the present tense and the past tense; the present tense describes a situation as simultaneous with the moment of speaking. The past tense

describes the prior moment of speaking. Aspect is a grammatical category related to the way in which the meaning of a verb is viewed with respect to the time of situation. There are two aspects in English: the perfect aspect and the progressive aspect, which may combine in a complex verb phrase, and are marked for present or past tense

Statement of the problem

Libyan students, who are at intermediate level, do not have adequate knowledge or background about the verb tense and aspect. Thus, they face some difficulties in attempting to practice English which in turn would impede their learning process. Accordingly, the study attempts to give adequate answers to the following research questions:

- 1- What are the common errors that students make in forming and using past tense/ aspect?
- 2- What makes Libyan EFL students commit errors when they try to use past tense/ aspect?

Justification of the study

This study sought to diagnose the common problems that Libyan EFL students encounter in their writing concerning the form and use of the past tense and aspect in order to recommend some applicable suggestions to help students to avoid committing these errors.

Significance of the study

This study was conducted to explore the problems encountered by Libyan EFL students in forming and using past tense and aspect. It is also hoped to be effective and useful for school teachers, university tutors, and students through the recommendation it might come out with.

For students: this study highlighted the difficulties or problems that face EFL students when forming and using past tense/aspect. Based on the data analysis, the study suggested some recommendations that might be helpful for students to overcome these problems. When students are aware of the areas of weakness, they will improve their English competence in forming and using past tense/aspect consequently.

For teachers: school teachers and university tutors are the dynamic and effective part in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Thus, when teachers are aware of their students' problems, they will try to treat the areas of weakness and create some scaffolding lessons.

This study provided concrete phases of explanation and of the problems that EFL students may encounter and on which teachers can depend on to help students in dealing with this grammatical issue.

Corder (1967) found out that learners' errors are beneficial in many ways, such as:

- 1- Teachers can monitor the learners' errors.
- 2- Researchers can get valid information on the strategies that learners use to learn or acquire the target language.

Mahaboonpati (2013) mentioned that the main causes that make learners commit errors may be from the following factors.

1. Interference errors caused by the transfer of grammatical elements from their mother tongue to the target language.
2. Overgeneralization which caused by learners create a deviant structure based on their own experience of other structures in the target language.
3. Performance errors are unsystematic errors that occur as the result of such things as memory lapses, tiredness, confusion, or strong emotion.
4. Communication strategy is an error resulting from the attempt to communicate in the target language without completely acquiring the grammatical forms.
5. Teacher-induced error can lead to errors resulting from teaching procedures contained in the text or employed by the teachers.

Research methodology

This part presents the data and methods used to obtain answers to the proposed research questions and problems. This section includes the research design, research instruments, the procedures for collecting and analyzing of data. The subjects of this study are native speakers of Arabic language whose major is English. The total number of the participants was 60 students. They were selected randomly. The reason for choosing participants at this level was based on the assumption that students at the age of 19-21, who are supposed to be at intermediate

level, were expected to have a good background and knowledge in using and forming the aspect of past tense.

The test targeted a group of sixty Libyan students of the English language. Participants were second year university students at Almergeb university. The considered number of participants of the sample was both males and females.

The test was administered during lecture time. Participants had thirty minutes to do the task, of two kinds of questions. The first question required writing the correct form of the verbs given between brackets within a sentence. The second question was to choose (True or False) of the given sentences deciding whether they are in the correct form and use of the past tense and aspect or not.

The test was intended to measure their ability in forming and using the different kinds of past tense aspects.

Results and Discussions

Findings and analysis:

The result of the study showed that the majority of the participants face problems in using and forming the past tense/ aspect as follows:

1- past simple: the study showed that 35% of the participants found difficulties in forming this aspect. This percentage shows that past simple aspect is not a great challenge for most of the students. that is most participants formed this tense and aspect correctly. They found it quite easy because forming past simple(tense/ aspect) is the first grammatical aspect that teachers and curriculum tend to focus on. Also, forming past simple tense needs making some changes on the main verb level by adding (–ed) suffixation. Difficulties were just when the irregular verbs were used.

2- past progressive : The difficulty rose to be 60% regarding past progressive. More than half of the participants failed in forming this tense/ aspect. The reason behind that is that forming past progressive needs to add the appropriate verb (to Be) as well as adding the progressive marker (-ing suffixation). It seems to be a heavy burden on students to add the suffix (–ing) to the main verb without preceding it with the suitable verb to (be). So, being not familiar with certain aspect or formula in learners' native language may cause critical problems in recognizing, conceptualizing and functioning it in the target language .

3- past perfect: This aspect does not exist in the participants mother tongue. Therefore, learners face difficulties in conceptualizing and using this aspect. The study expresses this difficulties through the results obtained. 88% of the participants did not give the correct response in forming past perfect aspect. EFL learners may not have exposed to this aspect dealing with certain situations. The results showed that students could not recognize the time line between past simple and past perfect tense. They overlap between these two tenses.

4- past perfect progressive: The result of the study showed that the participants are not familiar with this aspect. All of them could not form the past perfect progressive. They were not able to form this aspect because :

a- they may not have enough exposure to past perfect progressive

b- teachers may have neglected this kind of aspect because it is rarely used even by English native speakers. So, they might feel that teaching this aspect is a waste of time and effort.

Conclusion

Having studied past tense/ aspect, many significant points have been concluded. This study has investigated the written errors made by Libyan University students in forming and using past aspect. The findings of this study showed that most of Libyan university students find difficulty in forming and using past aspect.

There are problems such as overgeneralizing the rules of past tense /aspect, lack of knowledge, mother tongue interference etc. which might be the serious hinder of conceptualizing the past tense aspects. These factors made EFL students commit errors and errors when they attempt to form and use past tense/aspect. Moreover, it seems that learners face tremendous difficulties because 'ESL/EFL course and materials often ignore lexical aspect and its effects'(Cowan, 2008,p.354).

Finally, the study recommends that language teachers should focus on designing lessons and activities that make students face their difficulties and be aware to the areas of weaknesses. Also, teachers should use pedagogic grammar books which have activities and exercises that help students to overcome the errors they make. On the other hand, students should never expect that their L1 always has the same equivalent patterns in English language. Also, they should be conscious that committing errors while using L2 is a part of their learning process. So, errors in short-term would not hinder the students of learning and practicing English.

Teachers should focus on the students' errors and deal with them in task and activities rather than error correction. By using authentic materials "contextual materials", teachers can engage their students in interactive tasks and discussions by working in pairs or groups in order to raise the students' awareness on the area of language. Teachers should focus on the following three dimensions when teaching past tense-aspect.

1- Form. An inductive approach to teaching the form of English tense-aspect is to provide students with naturalistic data in which the input has somehow been enhanced (Sharwood 1993) in order to make the

verb endings more salient. A teacher might try, for example, giving his/her students short reading passages with certain verb endings boldfaced or italicized in order to draw their attention to the target tense-aspect.

2- Meaning. A way of getting students to produce different forms and meanings is to give them a list of three adverbials that commonly go together with the past tense-aspect combinations

3- Use. Teaching students to use the tenses in a right way seems to be a challenge that Libyan EFL students encounter. To have them figure out the difference between the simple past and the past progressive, have them think of a famous historical event that took place during their lifetime, for example, the Libyan demonstrations. Ask a student to say what their event was, and then ask other students to tell what they were doing at the time. Have them use the following frame:

When I heard about X, I was Y.

When I heard about the Libyan demonstrations, I was driving my car.

Moreover, a teacher may suggest some interesting topics related to a particular tense-aspect he/she focuses on to have his/ her students write about. For example, the teacher may ask them to write about their day (about what they did yesterday) in order to practice the written form of the simple past.

Teachers should not neglect pronunciation when working on the simple past. Though regular verbs will take the (-ed) ending to show they occurred in the past, -(-ed) will not be pronounced the same for every word. Brainstorm a list of regular verbs and then have your students sort them into two groups. The past pronunciation of one group sounds like [d] and the other like [t]. challenge your students to articulate the rule which determines which pronunciation to use.

Teachers should be patient enough not to correct students but guide them towards noticing their mistakes so that they are cognitively involved in the process of learning.

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