



**SEBHA UNIVERSITY  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT**

**INVESTIGATING THE GRAMMATICAL DIFFICULTIES FACE  
BY LIBYAN EFL COLLEGE STUDENTS**

**BY**

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## **Dedication**

To the one who keeps saying " I'm proud of you in your failures before your success". The one who supported and believed in me All these years, my wonderful father, **Mr. Mustafa Al zentai**. And also to my closest friend, who has the source to empower of inspiration, she who gave me strength when I thought of giving up, My beloved mother, and a very heartfelt thanks to my brothers and my younger sister.

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## **Abstract**

The word grammar means different things to different people. To the ordinary citizen, it connects the correctness or incorrectness of the language that he or she speaks. It means to a school student, an analytical and terminological study of sentences. Knowledge of grammar helps students in the correction of mistakes and improvement of written work. A human cannot learn a foreign language accurately only through a process of unconscious assimilation. Grammar is a basic knowledge of learning the language linguistically. So grammar is an essential element in learning a language. Grammatical rules are among other difficulties that face students in the learning process. This truth applies to those who are studying English at different levels of education. Second language learners usually make mistakes in certain grammatical rules. This research aimed to identify and analyze such grammatical difficulties to give a contribution to the study of linguistics and help students in identifying grammatical errors commonly made by second language learners of English. The participants of the study are 26 female college students majoring in the English language. The participants are divided into experimental and controlled groups. Based on the above, the researcher proposes an instructional program that 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 that will require them to use the present perfect and the past simple simultaneously. There is no statistically significant difference between the experimental group and the controlled group in the English mean scores of sophomore students majoring in English when it comes to using the present perfect tense. The results show that the 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 recommendations.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1INTRODUCTION**

This study explored the difficulties of English language grammar faced by Libyan university students in learning grammar as well as problems that teachers of grammar found when teaching grammar. It was conducted in Tripoli University, Zawia University, and other Vocational Higher Educational Institutions. It began with an explanation of the related literature focusing on theories of second language learning and grammar teaching methodology English is being taught as a foreign language in Libya. English is taught from the early years of education to the university level of education. Most of the teaching process focuses on mastering the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. All of the skills are to be improved in the process of learning English. Emmaryana (2010) emphasizes that in the process of learning English, writing ability is the most difficult and complicated language skill to be learned almost by the students in every level of education. In addition to that, another author says that for the most part, within the classroom, any mention of grammar causes the student moments of discomfort and sometimes, even terror (Al-Mekhlafi, 2011). Because grammar has so far become one of the problems faced by second language learners when learning other languages, the researcher attempts to find out the factors behind some difficulties in learning grammar.

Grammar Teaching the present perfect to Libyan college students is a challenging situation that needs extra effort from both the teacher and students as well. This study aims to explore the reasons behind the misuse of present perfect and past simple tenses by Libyan EFL students while writing a paragraph. The purpose was to pose those difficulties to researchers and teachers so that further research could be done either to find the factors or to take action to overcome the problems. In the effort of language learners studying other languages, there have been problems and theories found as well as other issues coming therewith (Bhela, 1999; Galasso, 2002; Lekova, 2010). Thus, dealing with students with these problems at the university level brought the present researchers to find out specific grammatical difficulties such as the present perfect and past simple tenses which they encounter in their effort to learn English as their second language.

### **1.2Research question:**

-What are the difficulties that facing students in learning present perfect and past simple?

### **1.2Research Problem**

The study investigates the challenges that students and lecturers faced in learning grammar. During this journey, learners are learning English as a Foreign Language encounter many obstacles and difficulties. This studies difficulties that Libyan EFL students have face when using the language, one of these difficulties is English. Moreover, these difficulties are considered stumbling blocks for Libyan students using the language even after they finish high levels of education. 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 and 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 who major in the English language at Sebha University. Even in 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 has designed a program that school teachers and university professors can use to help their students overcome their problems with using the present perfect tense in English, especially in writing.

#### **1.4The purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is to point out reasons why Libyan EFLcollege students finde it difficult using the past simple and the present perfect tenses.

#### **1.3The Hypothesis of the Study**

The significant differences between the controlled group and the experimental group in the mean scores of students who major in the English language at Sebha university when it comes to using the present perfect and the past simple tenses in writing.



## **CHAPTER TWO: Literature review**

## **CHAPTER TWO:LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1Introduction**

In the past and present-day Libya, learning English has been free to all students at all levels. Students start learning English as one of the main subjects from the age of 12 until the university stage. Libyan teachers followed the old traditional system, which was the grammar-translation method. This method was based on analyzing the grammar rules followed by translating sentences and texts into the students' target language and memorizing a large amount of vocabulary, which was selected from the reading texts. Moreover, several vocabulary items were presented with their translation equivalents. As Larsen-Freeman points out, "students are given lists of the target language vocabulary words and their native language equivalent and are asked to memorize them". Otherwise, reading and writing were a major focus whereas no systematic attention was paid to speaking and listening. For that reason, teachers tended to use the grammar-translation method by focusing on these features. "In Libya, the teaching was by using a translation method, which emphasized the acquisition of vocabulary through reading" (Barton, 1968). As a result, teachers ignored all the communicative approaches and techniques inside the class, for instance using different interactive activities such as games to attract learners' attention and keep them interested in the topic.

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 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 a 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. Other 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 influence 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 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.

There is no denying the fact that the English language has become the dominant language around the world. Since it is also important as a global language of business, it is necessary to develop the effective communication skills of the English language.

Effective communication skills of the English language are necessary for people of all professions. The concept of English verb tenses is very important in establishing effective communication. Hence, if you want to maintain both ways of communication better, that is, speaking and writing. You need to gain mastery over English tenses because a command of twelve basic tenses of the English language will aid you immensely in gaining effective communication skills. The term, tense, has been derived from the Latin word "Tempus" meaning time. Since there are many ways in which we express the time of action, we use tenses.

Tense is one aspect of English grammar that often leaves us confused. Tenses can be broadly categorized into past, present, and future in connection with a situation, action, or state. It is with tenses that many errors are committed.

Being weak in grammar poses a great challenge to our language, especially while writing. This often becomes a major handicap, and can also be a blow to your self-confidence and esteem. Nowadays most communication is through writing, be it courtesy mails, proposals, invoices, quotations, invites-everything needs to be written. So people who are into advancing their careers, their businesses, and those on the lookout for personal enrichment have no choice but to polish their grammar, especially the tenses. The area which deserves more attention is the choice of verbs because vocabulary should not be divorced from grammar. For example, verbs that have the core meaning of change (become, develop, increase, decrease) are often used in the present perfect, a tense which can have the meaning of change over time. This handout contains exercises to practice this skill.

There is sometimes reluctance to spend less time teaching the infrequent verb forms, perhaps because teachers feel that they are withholding parts of the grammatical system. One response would be to teach the remaining tenses for comprehension only without expecting students to produce the other tenses. Some will learn and use them correctly, but the rest of your class will not suffer as a result. Sorry, I mean, they will not have suffered. Your comments and responses are always welcome. The simple tenses are used for events that are immediate facts (or strong predictions in the future), complete or unchanging. The perfect tenses are used to show the prior nature of an event about some other point in time. The continuous/progressive tenses are used for an event that is not complete or is temporary or changing. (N.B. The word 'continuous' is used in British and Australian grammar books, while US grammar books use the word 'progressive' for these tenses).

## **2.2 Related Theories**

This research is a descriptive qualitative one based on the theories set forth by Pit Corder and Larry Selinker (Lightbown, 2011: 79-81). However, the aim of the research was not to predict further difficulties like the ones done by those holding Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis or CAH (Henderson, 1985; Yu, 2011), but to simply find out the errors made by the language learners. Thus, the notion of the difference between errors and mistakes was not addressed specifically in this research. It focuses more on error analysis theory in its nature. The data sources were naturally written materials copied from both students and teachers of the third and fourth year studying at the college of Arts' English language

department. The writings were about the students' general opinion about what was going on around them in society. Having the data source copied, the researchers began to read and collect relevant data related to the mistakes or errors the students made. After that, the researchers classified the data gathered into similar characteristics they had. The last step was to analyze the data to formulate the findings. Having the data processed systematically, the researchers prepared to report the result in an analytical, descriptive-qualitative report.

### **2.3 The present perfect is used to describe**

An action or situation that started in the past and continues in the present. I have lived in Bristol since 1984 (= and I still do.)

An action performed during a period that has not yet finished. She has been to the cinema twice this week (= and the week isn't over yet.)

A repeated action in an unspecified period between the past and now. We have visited Portugal several times. An action that was completed in the very recent past, expressed by 'just'. I have just finished my work.

An action when the time is not important. He has read 'War and Peace. (= the result of his reading is important) Actions that started in the past and are continuing the present perfect is often used for an action that started at some time in the past and is continuing now. In this case, the words *for* (with a length or period) and *since* (with a specific starting time) are usually used with the present perfect.

He has lived in Canada for five years. (He started living in Canada five years ago, and he's still living there now.) She has worked at the University since 1994. (She started working at the university in 1994, and she's working there now.)

2. Actions (single action or repeated actions) that happened at some unknown time in the past. We can use the present perfect to say that something *happened* (or didn't happen), but it's not important (or not known) *when* it happened. In this case, we often use the words *already*, *(not) yet*, *ever*, or *never* along with the present perfect. These words usually go in front of the past participle. I've already seen that film. I don't want to see it again. (It doesn't matter when I saw it.) Have you ever been to Germany? (It doesn't matter when you went — I just want to know whether you have been there or not.) They have eaten at that restaurant many times. (Repeated past actions; when they ate it isn't important).

3. Actions that happened in the past, but have an effect in the present. This use is a little more difficult than the other two. In this case, the action happened at some time in the past, but the effect of the action is still important now. It's easiest to understand this use if we compare present perfect sentences with simple past sentences.

## **CHAPTER THREE: Methodology**

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction:**

This research adopted a mixed-methods approach. The rationale for this is related to the purpose of the study and research questions, and therefore, the study takes a philosophically pragmatic approach. Qualitative data were collected through survey questionnaires involving (26) participants at Sebhs University and were analyzed using Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews involving 26 participants, supported by a document analysis of 26 pieces of students' written work. The findings revealed that most participants recognize that grammar is important in learning a foreign language and that the low level of students' language competence at the outset of courses has impacted learning grammar. The design of the study was quasi-experimental. The participants were in two groups, randomly assigned to controlled and experimental groups. The participants of the study were twenty-six sophomore students studying English at Sebha University Libya. 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.

### **3.2 Data Collection Instruments**

Writing 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 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 while being evaluated - that of present perfect.

### **3.3 The sample of the study**

The sample consisted of 26 students doing their first degree in English at the University of Sebha the researcher used a prospective cross-lag design to examine reciprocal effects of learning grammar problems and changes, testing an overall model examining effects of learning grammar.

### **3.4 The Instructional Program**



The researcher has developed an instructional program for the experimental groups that teachers teach 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 at showing students the absence of some Arabic language grammar that does not exist in English and vice versa.

### **Step Two**

This step shows students, through examples, the difference 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 students themselves that were taken from their real experience of their everyday lives. This step aims 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 practice than anything else.

### **Step Three**

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

## Chapter Four

### Data Analysis And Discussion

#### 4.1 Introduction:

The perfect in English creates problems for both elementary and advanced learners. It is interpreted frequently as an optional alternative to the simple past tense; this interpretation of its function leads to frequent errors of tense usage. Difficulties with the present perfect tense are often reinforced by faulty teaching. The present perfect tense refers to an action or state that either occurred at an indefinite time in the past (e.g., we have talked before) or began in the past and continued to the present time (e.g., he has grown impatient over the last hour). This tense is formed by have/has + the past participle

Among the mistakes found from the data the researchers have analyzed, below are the issues occurring the most. They cover issues about verbs and tenses.

#### 4.2 Verbs or Predicates

Grammatical difficulties encountered by the students about verbs seen from the data are often to other issues like tenses and syntactic categories. The term predicate is employed by the writers here about terms of Libyansyntactic function in Arabic. As the learners' linguistic background is Arabic, Some of the errors committed by the students are brought forward in the data below.

*My father tired.*

The **present perfect** is formed from the present tense of the verb **have** and the **past participle** of a verb.

We use the present perfect:

for something that **started in the past** and **continues in the present**:

They've **been married** for nearly fifty years.

She **has lived** in Liverpool all her life.

when we are talking about our **experience up to the present**:

I've **seen** that film before.

I've **played** the guitar ever since I was a teenager.

He **has written** three books and he is working on another one.

We often use the adverb **ever** to talk about experience up to the present:

My last birthday was the worst day I **have ever had**.

Among typical difficulties encountered by the students related to how verbs and adverbs are used is the absence of helping verbs. This often occurs in nominal sentences or constructions. In (1) above, the possible verb *was* or *to be* is not inserted by the student between the subject *my father* and the complement *tired*. Another case found is demonstrated by constructions (2) and (3) in the following cluster.

- 2) *I don't patient to go there.*
- 3) *I asked my father...*

In contrary to the case discussed in number (1) these two data contain linguistic elements that might be considered by the students as verbs used correctly. However, although (2) contains *don't* as an element that is usually used with verbs, there is no verb in the sentence. The other construction in (3) has *to ask* as a word possible to be counted as a verb but it is in an incorrect form. Among possible corrections, putting *asking* in its simple past form *asked* is the most acceptable one to make it a grammatically accurate clause. The following data also contain problems about verbs but it is more about the agreements between the subjects and the verbs.

- (4) *Maybe it's look silly but...*
- (5) *These have the same perspective.*
- (6) *It also help Libya...*

Datum (4) for example, has its verb *look* but the letter *s*, which should structurally be placed with the verb, was misplaced and attached to the previous word. In this form, *its look* or *it is look is* ungrammatical in the construction. Number (5) and (6) prove that the students sometimes use the incorrect form of a verb or violate the subject-verb agreement rules. In other words, they use *has* where it has to be *have* and *help* where it has to be *helps* or *helped*.

Problems with tenses were also found a lot from the data sources. Most of the time, the students used the present tense to express distinctions of time. Five examples are elaborated in the following. In (7), the student made two mistakes related to tense; first with *is* which should be *was* and second with *want* which should be *wanted*. The data in (8) and (9) also demonstrate the same issue in which *am* and *is* are used for *was*. Using the simple past form is the right choice here as the propositions in the clauses refer to the past. The action expressed by the verb *learn* in (10) should be *learned* because it is about a past event but the student used the present form instead. Related to the notion of tenses,

in many cases, students will have to be able to identify whether certain clauses should be in present or past tenses. That is number **(11)**, for instance, needs a logical understanding that the action in the clause was in the past, so the verb *became* is the correct form.

**(7) That is me. I always want to ask questions.**

**(8) When I am a child,...**

**(9) Who is the first fisherman?**

**(10) After I learn to read...**

**(11) This thought become philosophy because...**

Apart from the common mistakes above, the learners may use a past form where they need to use the present. The sentence below shows this kind of tendency. The verb *knew* is used instead of *know*.

**(12) We knew a lot of cultures.**

This sentence looks acceptable grammatically at glance, but it is not when the context is brought into the discussion. The researchers looked at the context in which the sentence was used and found out that the student was talking about the fact that *we nowadays know various cultures*. Other data also show the same problem with tenses.

Forming the present perfect

The present perfect of any verb is composed of two elements: the appropriate form of the auxiliary verb *to have* (present tense), plus the past participle of the main verb. The past participle of a regular verb is *base+ed*, e.g. *played, arrived, looked*. For irregular verbs, see the **Table of irregular verbs** in the section called '**Verbs**'

## **Chapter five :Conclusion**

## CONCLUSION

The present perfect is a grammatical combination of the present tense and perfect tense aspect that is used to express a past event that has present consequences. The term is used particularly in the context of English grammar to refer to forms like "I have finished". The forms are present because they use the present tense of the auxiliary verb have and perfect. After all, they use that auxiliary in combination with the past participle of the main verb. (Other perfect constructions also exist, such as the past perfect: "I had eaten.").The representations of the errors elaborated above underline grammatical difficulties encountered by the students in learning English as their second language. The researchers tend to hold that the difficulties, like the lack of subject-verb agreement, plural markers, or rules related tenses, might be caused by the linguistic backgrounds of the learners but as the objective of this research was to simply identify the difficulties the students face, the researchers would leave the questions related to factors of and predictions about the errors for further research. English teachers and researchers, however, have to be aware of the issues brought up here so that solutions might be found or emphases could be made to minimize the mistakes and maximize the learning process.

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