

## **Is Avoidance a Reflection of Mother Tongue Interference? The Case for the English Present Perfect Tense**

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### **1. Introduction**

Practising teachers, as well as language learning researchers involved with Arab learners of English as a foreign language must have observed the fact that the perfect tense in its present, past as well as continuous forms is one of the most difficult English tenses to use well or even correctly. They must have also noticed that the present perfect simple tense and the present perfect continuous tend to be replaced by the past simple tense and the present continuous respectively. This problem, however, is not peculiar to Arabic-speaking learners of English.

In *Realms of Meaning*, Hofmann (1993:119) explains that "one of the harder things about learning English well is knowing when to use the past tense and when to use the perfect aspect". Various research studies into the acquisition of the present perfect tense suggest that this is a universal problem involving learners of English as a foreign/second language from diverse language backgrounds. In a paper presented at the annual convention of TESOL held in Honolulu in May 1982, Raymond concludes that "ESL learners often avoid using the present perfect tense or use it improperly". In contrast with native speakers of English sampled from newspaper editorials, of whom 75% used the present perfect, only 22% of ESL college students used the present perfect correctly. The researcher attributes this avoidance in part to "lack of understanding of the function of the present perfect, especially in contrast with the simple past". Although not stated, one is led to believe that the ESL subjects of

this study used the simple past where the present perfect should have been used. This is the same strategy employed by Arabic-speaking learners of EFL (cf. Mukattash, 1978; Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989).

In another research study involving Japanese learners of ESL, (Tamada, 1997) argues that the acquisition of the English present perfect tense is a major problem encountered by Japanese learners. He ascribes this to the different nature of the present perfect tense in Japanese and "learners' difficulty in dealing with aspect in English". Also, (Keyvani, 1980) arrives at similar conclusions in relation to Iranian learners of EFL, and adds that a major problem confronting the subjects of his research is their inability to comprehend the function of the English present perfect tense, which is expressed in Farsi in a different way.

## 2. Research Topic

One of the most frequent errors made by Arab learners in English arises from the actual misuse of tenses in English, as the rules governing their use in English are different from those in Arabic. As the English present perfect tense is probably the most frequently avoided tense by Arab learners (Mukattash, 1978; Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989), a contrastive analysis of the verb systems in Arabic and English is essential. First of all, Arabic is a highly aspectual language. While English combines a choice of tenses involving simple (present and past), perfective as well as progressive aspects, Arabic makes two basic distinctions: the perfect and imperfect aspects. The former is used to describe a completed action (*often in the past*) while the latter is used to describe an action not yet completed (*often in the present or future*). These aspects are based on the notion of the completion or incompleteness of an activity and not the time of completion or incompleteness. This explains why Arab learners often have problems knowing when to use the present perfect tense, which tends to be replaced by the past simple tense as it seems to correspond to the Arabic perfect aspect, i.e. past tense.

The following examples illustrate the common errors observed in Arab learners' written as well as spoken English when attempting the present perfect tense:

- The teacher *did not arrive yet*. Instead of (The teacher *has not arrived yet*)  
Arabic equivalent: لم يصل المعلم بعد
- I *did not see* Mohamed *today*. Instead of (I *have not seen* Mohamed *today*)  
Arabic equivalent: لم أر محمد اليوم
- I *am working* here for almost 20 years. Instead of (I *have been* working here for almost 20 years).  
Arabic equivalent: أعمل هنا منذ ما يقارب العشرين عام

The errors illustrated above are common among Arab learners of EFL. It is also true that the present perfect tense is definitely one of the most difficult forms for them. For instance, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989:159-160) explain that “the fact that the English present perfect tense does not have a *well-defined* counter-part in Arabic that can cover all the the meanings covered by it, gives rise to... types of errors in which either the simple past (*very often*) or the present continuous, or even the simple present form is used”. This is certainly true, and a similar argument has been made elsewhere in this paper, but any claim that the present perfect tense does not exist in Arabic is seriously misleading. Even the authors’ view presented above seems to imply that the present perfect tense does exist in Arabic, although not in the same way it is expressed in English. A close examination of the Arabic examples cited above reveals that the actions described are *past with a result in the present*, in which case the perfect tense should have been used, not the past simple tense. Also references to adverbs of unfinished time (*today*) and adverbial of duration (*yet*) indicate that the perfect tense should be used. In the light of this, it is rather unsafe to attribute Arab learners’ avoidance of the present perfect tense in English only to mother-tongue interference. Other factors should be considered.

### 3. Research Questions

This research study examines Arab learners’ avoidance of the English present perfect tense in writing. The following major questions are addressed:

1. Is Arab learners' tendency to avoid the English present perfect tense a reflection of mother-tongue interference? In other words, is it due to differences between Arabic and English in relation to this particular structure?
2. Does the role of avoidance tend to be an interactive one, in which it conspires with other factors such as semantic, syntactic, and cognitive simplicity, which make some forms/tenses easier to learn than others.
3. Do Arab learners adopt other strategies similar to those of first-language acquirers, such as simplification and overgeneralization?
4. Is Arab learners' avoidance or misuse of the present perfect tense due to their inability to establish proper form-meaning associations, a prerequisite for the acquisition of the English tense-aspect system?

These major questions and others will be addressed in the light of the results of the present study, which will be presented later in this paper.

#### 4. Subjects of the study

The subjects involved in the present study are seventy-eight native speakers of Arabic in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures in the University of Bahrain. All are studying English as a specialization in the first semester (99-2000), and are divided into the following three groups:

- Group 1: Twenty-six *first* year students
- Group 2: Twenty-six *second* year students
- Group 3: Twenty-six *third* year students

Most of these students are taking English as a major and Education as a minor, as they are being trained to teach English as FL in Government schools in Bahrain. A few are taking other minors such as translation, history, American studies or French. Most of the courses they have to take as University or college requirements, mainly in the fields of humanities and social studies, are taught in Arabic, as it is the University's *official* language of instruction. So, they can be classified as EFL students.

## 5. Research data collection procedure

The subjects of the present study were given a translation elicitation task; where they were required to translate 15 sentences from standard Arabic into English (*task appended*). All the Arabic sentences included *simple present perfect* tense structures, with the exception of sentences 8 and 14, in which the present perfect *continuous* was used. Another important point that is worth making in relation to the 15 Arabic sentences is that practically all of them included particles indicating that a perfect tense structure is required, and not past simple tense, as illustrated below:

Sentence (1) included the *indefinite* past reference في السنوات الخمس الأخيرة, which translates literally into English as *in the past five years*. Sentences (2, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 11) included the Arabic *adverbials of duration* بعد/ حتى الآن, which literally translate into English as *yet* and *so far* respectively. Sentences (3, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 15) contained the Arabic *adverbial of time* منذ, which is equivalent to *since* in English.

The three groups were allowed 45 minutes, the entire duration of lecture time, to translate the 15 sentences from Arabic into English. The work was carried out under instructor's supervision, and the subjects were neither allowed to refer to a dictionary nor ask the instructor for assistance.

## 6. Results

A close examination of table one below shows very clearly that the three groups of subjects involved in in this study find the English present perfect tense difficult. Although the Arabic sentences they were required to translate into English included references to past actions with present relevance, in which case a present perfect tense should be used, most of them used the past simple tense for the simple present perfect tense and the present continuous for the present perfect continuous.

Generally, the performance of Group one (1<sup>st</sup> year students) and Group two (2<sup>nd</sup> year students) was much lower than that of Group 3 (3<sup>rd</sup> year students). As shown in table one below, the best performance by the 1<sup>st</sup> group was in the translation of sentence 11, where 34.6% of the subjects produced a correct present perfect tense in English. This group's worst

performance was in sentences 3 and 14, with only 3.8% of the students producing a present perfect tense structure. As for the 2<sup>nd</sup> group's performance, the best was in the translation of sentence 6, with 50% of the students producing correct present perfect continuous and simple present perfect structures. Their worst performance was in translating sentence 2, where only 11.5% managed to produce the required present perfect tense structure. The 3<sup>rd</sup> group's best performance was in sentence 6, with 84.6% of the students producing a correct present perfect tense sentence in English. The worst performance was in sentence 2, where 38.5% of the subjects gave the English present perfect tense structure required.

As for the three groups combined, the best performance was in the translation of sentence 5, with 50% of the students producing an accurate present perfect structure. The worst was in sentence 2, where only 19.2% managed to produce the correct present perfect structure required.

Table 1  
% of Correct and Incorrect Responses

No.	Sentences/Perfect Tense Structures Expected	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Total	
		Cor	Inc	Cr	Inc	Cr	Inc	Cr	Inc
1	..the decisions that <i>have been taken</i> in the last five years.	11.5	88.5	23.1	76.9	65.4	34.6	33.3	66.7
2	The company <i>has contacted...hasn't received</i> any positive responses yet.	7.5	93.2	11.5	88.5	38.5	61.5	19.2	80.8
3	Since he was appointed as manager, sales <i>have increased...</i>	3.8	96.2	23.1	76.9	61.5	38.5	28.2	71.8
4	I bought a house last week, but I <i>haven't moved</i> yet.	23.1	76.9	34.6	65.4	65.4	34.6	41.0	59.0
5	Although <i>I've spent</i> a year in this company, I <i>haven't met the manager yet</i> .	26.9	73.1	42.3	57.7	80.8	19.2	50.0	50.0
6	I <i>haven't read</i> a map for a long time.	23.1	76.9	34.6	65.4	84.6	15.4	47.4	52.6
7	How many matches <i>has</i> your team <i>played</i> this season? We <i>have played</i> 3 matches so far.	23.1	76.9	30.8	69.2	53.8	46.2	35.9	64.1

8	<i>I've been looking for Ahmed. Have you seen him today? No, I haven't seen him today.</i>	23.1	76.9	50.0	50.0	80.8	19.2	51.3	48.7
9	<i>How many have applied so far?</i>	23.1	76.9	34.6	65.4	80.8	19.2	46.2	53.8
10	<i>How long have you known.. I've known him since we joined the company 5 years ago.</i>	15.4	84.6	26.9	73.1	57.7	42.3	33.3	66.7
11	<i>The investigators haven't found the cause yet?</i>	34.6	65.4	23.1	76.9	76.9	23.1	44.9	55.1
12	<i>The air crash has turned into a diplomatic crisis.</i>	7.7	92.3	15.4	84.6	46.2	53.8	23.1	76.9
13	<i>..since then the number has increased to 1000.</i>	11.5	88.5	19.2	80.8	65.4	34.6	32.1	67.9
14	<i>The internet has created a revolution in communications.</i>	3.8	96.2	15.4	84.6	65.4	34.6	28.2	71.8
15	<i>Since joining the University, I've been teaching the same courses.</i>	7.7	92.3	19.2	80.8	76.9	23.1	34.6	65.4

Note: *complete selected sentences appended*

In almost all cases of nonuse of the English perfect tense, the subjects of this study systematically used the past simple tense instead of the simple present perfect tense, and the present continuous instead of the present perfect continuous (note sentences 8 & 15 only for the latter case). They did so despite the fact that the Arabic sentences they were required to translate into English contained clear references to actions requiring the present perfect tense in its simple and progressive forms.

A statistical analysis involving the use of the Chi-Square test reveals that the differences observed in the performance of the three groups combined were highly significant, except for sentences 2, 4, 7, 10 and 12. Table 2 below illustrates such results.

Table 2  
Test Statistics for the Performance of Groups  
1, 2 and 3 in Sentences 1-15

<b>Sentences</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chi-Square</b>	18.567	9.289	22.625	10.148	15.795	22.029	5.720	17.122
<b>Asymp. Significance</b>	.000	.010*	.000	.006*	.000	.000	.057*	.000
<b>Sentences</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	
<b>Chi-Square</b>	19.250	11.049	16.679	11.978	19.991	27.125	31.203	
<b>Asymp. Significance</b>	.000	.004*	.000	.003*	.000	.000	.000	

Note: An asterisk indicates the differences are insignificant

A comparative statistical analysis involving the use of the Mann-Whitney *U*-test showed the differences in the performance of Group one (1<sup>st</sup> year students) and Group two (2<sup>nd</sup> year students) to be insignificant in relation to all the sentences they were expected to translate, although the second group's observed performance was relatively better than that of the first group. The performance of Group 3 (3<sup>rd</sup> year students), however, was significantly better than Group one's performance, with the exception of sentences 2 and 7, where the difference in performance was insignificant. The differences in the performance of Groups 2 and 3 were found to be significant in connection with sentences 1, 3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 14 and 15. The differences in their performance in relation to sentences 2, 4, 7, 8, 10 and 12 were insignificant, as table 3 below reveals.



Table 3  
Comparative Test Statistics for Groups 1, 2 and 3

Sentences	Groups 1&2		Groups 1&3		Groups 2&3	
	U-test value	Asymp. Sig.	U-test value	Asymp. Sig.	U-test value	Asymp. Sig.
One	299.000	.276	156.000	.000	195.000	.002
Two	235.000	.641	234.000	.009	247.000	.026
Three	286.000	.086	143.000	.000	195.000	.002
Four	299.000	.363	195.000	.002	234.000	.028
Five	286.000	.248	156.000	.000	208.000	.005
Six	299.000	.363	130.000	.000	169.000	.000
Seven	312.000	.536	234.000	.024	260.000	.095
Eight	247.000	.046	143.000	.000	234.000	.021
Nine	299.000	.363	143.000	.000	182.000	.001
Ten	299.000	.313	195.000	.002	234.000	.026
Eleven	299.000	.363	195.000	.002	156.000	.000
Twelve	312.000	.390	208.000	.002	234.000	.017
Thirteen	312.000	.446	156.000	.000	182.000	.001
Fourteen	299.000	.162	130.000	.000	169.000	.000
Fifteen	299.000	.227	104.000	.000	143.000	.000

## 7. Discussion

The overall results of the current study seem to confirm the findings reported in earlier research works that the simple present perfect and the present perfect continuous are for the ESL learner, and certainly for the Arabic-speaking learner of ESL, two of the most troublesome tenses in the English verb system. The results also lend further support to previously documented evidence that ESL learners in general confuse the simple present perfect and the present perfect continuous with the simple past tense and the present continuous respectively. The Arabic-speaking subjects of this study showed a clear tendency to *avoid* using the present perfect tense in its simple and progressive aspects. Although the Arabic sentences they were required to translate into English describe events in the past with relevance to the present time, in which case a present perfect tense should be used, the students systematically substituted the past simple for the present perfect. In contrast to the received misconception held by many researchers linking *avoidance* to *mother tongue interference* (Schachter, 1974), the results of the current study seem to suggest other factors contributing to the phenomenon of avoidance, in addition to differences between the learner's L1 and the target language.

The results of this study appear to indicate that ESL Arab learners' avoidance of the present perfect tense in English is not entirely a reflection of Arabic interference. It is rather a result of a complex combination of a wide range of factors involving semantic, syntactic and cognitive simplicity, which is associated with early/late acquisition. Although the English present perfect tense does not have a well-defined counterpart in Arabic, the perfect aspect is used quite frequently in both spoken and written Arabic. The subjects of this study, for instance, seem to have avoided the perfect tense and used the past simple tense instead more frequently where the Arabic sentences they were expected to translate lack clear references to the perfect aspect which emphasizes the relevance of events in the past to the present, such as "yet", "so far", "today", and "this season". In simpler terms, those present perfect structures which lacked semantic transparency were avoided while semantically transparent perfect structures were used more confidently. So, as far as avoidance of English present perfect tenses is concerned, *semantic transparency* seems to play a major role, probably, more important than L1 and L2 differences. Table 4 below shows how avoidance tendency relates to semantic transparency, especially for groups 1 and 2 (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students), ranking sentences in a *descending order* from most to least difficult.

Table 4 Ranking Order from Most to Least Difficult  
For Groups 1 and 2

Sentences	Group 1		Sentences	Group 2	
	Rank	Semantically transparent?		Rank	Semantically transparent?
3/14	1	No	2	1	No/Yes
2	2	No/Yes	12/14	2	No/Yes
15/12	3	No	13/15	3	No
1/13	4	No	1/3/11	4	No/No-Yes
10	5	No	10	5	No
4/6/7/8/9	6	Yes/ No/No-Yes/Yes	7	6	No/Yes
5	7	Yes	4/6/9	7	Yes
11	8	Yes	5/8	8/9	Yes

Groups 2 and 3, as table 4 above shows, appear to have relied quite heavily on semantic transparency in their decision to use or avoid the present perfect tense. The more the structure is semantically transparent, the more

it is likely to be used confidently. This is probably due to the fact that they have not yet established proper form-meaning associations. Moreover, these subjects' true avoidance, which represents choice of usage, is not due to ignorance but rather to semantic constraints imposed on the present perfect tense in Arabic. In other words, avoidance of the present perfect tense cannot be simply attributed to linguistic differences between Arabic and English, but could be caused by their "lack of understanding of the nature of this tense, which is neither wholly present nor wholly past, but rather paradoxically both present and past" (Ralph, 1967). Their regular preference for the past simple tense at the expense of the present perfect tense could also be due a strategy of simplification as they probably find the former easier to use than the latter, a strategy which even native speakers sometimes employ (Gathercole, 1985). In this regard, Smith (1995) argues that "contrastive meaning is an important element in understanding the force of aspectual choice, and that this information is part of the pragmatic knowledge that speakers have of their own language".

As for the subjects in the third group, semantic transparency seems to be an important determining factor in these students' decision to use or avoid the present perfect tense. However, as the students in the 3<sup>rd</sup> group are third year English majors, one expects them to have a greater control over the usage and functions of the English present perfect tense in comparison with the subjects in groups 1 and 2, who are 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year English majors. Table 5 below shows how semantic transparency played a relatively lesser role in decisions made the students in group 3 as to when to avoid or use the present perfect tense.

Table 5 Ranking Order from Most to Least Difficult for Group 3

Sentences	Rank	Semantically transparent?
2	1	No/Yes
12	2	No
7	3	No/Yes
10	4	No
3	5	No
1/4/13/14	6	No/Yes/No/No
11/15	7	Yes/perfect continuous
5/8/9	8	Yes/Yes/Yes
6	9	No

Note: complete selected sentences appended

A close examination of tables 4 and 5 above shows that sentence 12 in the translation task seems to have posed a great difficulty for the three groups because it was the least semantically transparent. For groups 2 and 3, it was the second most difficult, and for the group 1, the third most difficult. The following is sentence 12 for illustration: *The air crash has turned into a political crisis between Egypt and the USA*. This sentence has no adverbials of duration such as “yet” or “so”. It also lacks references to unfinished time such as “today” or “this season”, which make the sentence more semantically transparent. 92.3% of group 1, 84.6% of group 2 and 53.8 of group 3 used past simple tense (*turned*) instead. Sentence 14, for instance, also lacks any semantic transparency, and that explains why it ranked second on the scale of difficulty for group 1 and first for group 2. To illustrate this point, the following is sentence 14: *The Internet has created a revolution in communications*. Also here 96.2% of group 1 and 84.6% of group 2 used past simple tense (*created*) instead. Sentence 2: *The company has contacted hundreds of clients, but it has not received any positive replies yet*, ranked second on the scale of difficulty for group 1, first for groups 2 and 3. Most of the avoidance cases were in the first clause of the sentence as it included no references to past actions which are relevant to the present, and so 93.2% of group 1, 88.5 of group 2 and 61.5 of group 3 used a past simple tense (*contacted*). By contrast, their performance in the second clause was better.

## 8. Conclusions

On the whole, the results of the current study seem to provide some evidence that ESL Arab learners’ tendency to avoid the present perfect tense, which tends to be systematically replaced by the past simple tense, is not purely a reflection of Arabic interference. Although the aspectual systems in Arabic and English are different, with Arabic using the perfective only with reference to the past, any claim that Arab learners’ avoidance of the present perfect tense in English is due only to MT interference is highly misleading. In his book, *Aspect*, Comrie (1976) explains that “Arabic has specifically perfect forms too, formed typically with the particle *qad* (قد). Thus an explicit present perfect uses *qad* and the perfective, e.g. *Qad kataba* (*he has written*), the perfective being used because the verb form also has perfective and past meaning”(p:81). So the problem Arab learners of ESL have with the English perfect tense is not caused by the absence of the perfect tense from Arabic but rather by their

inability to establish proper form-meaning/tense-aspect associations. Also the fact that English is highly inflectional and the effect of this on the tense-aspect system might have a role in this regard.

The findings of this study appear to indicate that *semantic transparency* has an important effect on ESL Arab students' choice of usage or avoidance of the English perfect tense as tables 4 and 5 clearly show. The students were expected to translate Arabic sentences with perfect forms into English. Those Arabic sentences which contained explicit perfect tense particles, adverbs of unfinished time or adverbials of duration, i.e. those semantically transparent, were found to be easier to translate into English with present perfect forms. By contrast, those that were not as semantically transparent were found difficult, and as a result, were translated into English with past simple tense instead. This was specifically the case with the first clause of sentence 2, and sentences 12 and 14 (see appendix). In this respect, the use of translation exercises in teaching the semantic meanings of the English present perfect tense may be effective, although more research is required in this regard.

Another dimension in this regard, although not within the scope of this research, may be related to the *early/late acquisition* process of the English present perfect tense by Arab learners. Generally, ESL Arab learners are taught the present perfect only after they have been taught the simple present and past tenses, which correspond roughly to the tenses in Arabic, and addition of aspect is therefore confusing. The result is that the present perfect tends to be replaced by the past simple tense.

Furthermore, the question of *simplification* as a communication strategy should not be ruled out with regard to Arab learners' avoidance of the present perfect tense in English and their use of the past simple tense instead. This is due to the fact that the present perfect requires more transformation work involving adding *verb to have* and using the past participle form of the main verb. This task is made more difficult when students have to cope with the aspectual function of the present perfect tense in English. For instance, Bardovi (1997) in a study which examines the emergence of the present perfect in the interlanguage of instructed learners of ESL finds that "adding a new inflection in the tense/aspect system requires establishing new form-meaning associations as well as revising existing ones".

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