Iraqi EFL University Students' Recognition and Production of Present Perfect Tense

Wi'am Majeed Mohammed[a], [a]College of Agriculture Al-Qasim Green University, Email: [a]ameeraljubawii@yahoo.com

This study investigates the problem of EFL learner's acquisition of present perfect tense. Generally, present perfect tense refers to an action or state that either occurred at an indefinite time in the past or began in the past and continued to the present time. The general formula of this tense is (has/have + past participle). For its great importance in English grammar, this paper tends to raise the following questions: (1) do Iraqi EFL learners have a difficulty in recognising or producing present perfect tense? (2) do Iraqi EFL learners master the use of the present perfect tense during the four-college period? Due to the above-mentioned questions, the following aims are required: (1) investigating the difficulties that Iraqi EFL learners have in recognising and producing present perfect tense, (2) Conducting a performance test to Iraqi learners of EFL at the university level to check whether or not these learners face difficulties in recognising or producing this tense. To approve those aims, the following hypotheses are set: (1) Iraqi EFL learners face a difficulty in producing present perfect tense, (2) Mastery of the use of present perfect tense is not achieved by Iraqi learners over a four-year period of EFL learning at the university level. The following procedure is to analyse errors made by Iraqi EFL University students in recognition and production of present perfect tense at College of Education / University of Babylon.

Key words: *Error analysis, recognition, production, present perfect, EFL.*

Introduction

The Problem

The present perfect is used to indicate a link between the present and the past. The time of the action is before now but not specified, and we are often more interested in the result than in the action itself (Quirk et al., 1985: 652). This paper tries to find answers to the following questions, i.e. problems:

1. Do Iraqi EFL learners have difficulty in recognising or producing present perfect tense?
2. Do Iraqi EFL learners master the use of the present perfect tense during the four-college period?

The Aims

This paper aims at:

1. Investigating the advantages of using the present perfect tense by discussing the theoretical survey of some of the latest linguistic material available in this respect.
2. Conducting a performance test to Iraqi learners of EFL at the university level to check whether or not these learners face difficulties in producing this tense.
3. Finding out the causes behind the students' errors in order to suggest helpful remedial work.

The Hypotheses

It hypothesises the following:

1. A significant number of Iraqi EFL learners at the university level face more difficulties in using present perfect tense on the production level than the recognition one.
2. Mastery of the use of present perfect tense is not achieved by Iraqi learners over a four-year period of EFL learning at the university level.

The Procedures

The procedures to be followed in this paper are:

1. Presenting a theoretical background knowledge about present perfect tense.
2. Conducting a performance test to a representative sample of Iraqi EFL learners. Test items will cover both recognition and production level.
3. Test results are then analysed using statistical means and rates to get at a corpus of data that can verify the validity of the hypotheses proposed in section 1.3 above.
4. Useful empirical conclusions are drawn from the test results and certain relevant recommendations are offered.

The Limits

This study will limit itself to the analysis of the performance of Iraqi EFL learners at the university level in using present perfect tense. The subjects of the study consist of Forty

students from the fourth class at the Department of English at the Colleges of Education, University of Babylon.

The Value

It is hoped that the work conducted in this study will shed some useful light upon the performance of Iraqi learners of EFL in present perfect tense. In addition, it is hoped that the results of this study can prove to be beneficial to both curriculum designers and language teachers in better understanding the learners' difficulties, and in designing affective remedial programs in this respect.

Historical Background

Introduction

English is one of the most well-known languages in the world for its great importance in different fields. Further to this, the English language currently becomes the learnt language by many people in every country, such as Iraq. Teaching this language comes to be called as "teaching of foreign language". In other words, for Iraqi EFL students, Arabic is the mother language; whereas English is the foreign language, target language. Teaching this foreign language, i.e. English, is controlled by the government, i.e. Iraqi government, and the followed system in that country. The followed curriculum in Iraq provides students with some rules to be followed in writing and speaking the English language.

Moreover, grammar has to be taught in an appropriate way for it is the basic element of every language. Without grammar, language cannot be comprehended, e.g. look at the difference between the following sentences:

1. John's dog has bitten me.
2. Me has bitten John's dog.

Sentence (1), is grammatical and can be understood, unlike sentence (2) which is not grammatical. The second sentence is incorrect since the first element should be the subject pronoun not object.

In other words, (me) at the second sentence is not the doer of the action. As such, it cannot be the subject of the sentence regardless of the meaning (Thornbury, 1999: 1). It is said that grammar is concerned with the description of the rules that govern a certain language to show how, e.g. English sentences, are formed (ibid). Students who learn a foreign language, i.e. English, face many problems whether at the recognition level or at the production one. As such, this paper aims at deducting the problems that Iraqi EFL students face.

Tense
Understanding Tense
Generally, the word 'tense' is derived from the word 'tempu' which has a Latin origin. Commonly, people use tense to refer to the time of an event which relates to the situation of an utterance or the time of speaking (Lyons, 1995: 312). Actually, tense is defined by many linguists. (Leech and Svartvik, 2002: 415) have a contribution in this regard and stated that "by tense we understand the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time (past, present, future)".

Structurally, tenses are formed either by changing the verb, e.g. go, went, gone, or by adding auxiliary verbs, e.g. will go (Swan, 1980:640). Forms of verbs indicate the time of an event, i.e. whether an action is present, past or future (Aik and Hui, 1992: 294). To sum up, tense is a verb-form that indicates the time at which a state or an action happens.

Types of Tense
Depending on the assumption which indicates that tense is used to refer to the relationship between the action and the time that takes place at specific point of time. In English, there are two tenses: past and present; where future is regarded as an aspect not a tense (Web Sourse1). The present is like the base form plus the –s of the third person singular which added sometimes. Furthermore, regular verbs have –ed or –d at the past. While irregular changes the form of the base form, e.g. go, went. In addition to what has been mentioned, there are about other nine tenses in English that enable speakers to express themselves well (Langan, 2003: 188). On the other hand, Azar explains more tense like the simple tenses, progressive tenses, the perfect tenses and the perfect progressive tenses (Azar, 1989: 2-7).

Others state that there are four types of verb tense in English: the simple, the continuous, the perfect and the perfect continuous. Each type of them has past, present and future as well as other modal forms. (Web Source2). Based on the above-mentioned types, it is concluded the following:

Tense	Example
1. Present	I work.
2. Past	I worked last night.
3. Future	I will work tomorrow.
4. Present perfect	I have worked.
5. Past perfect	I had worked.
6. Future perfect	I will have worked many hours.
7. Present progressive	I am working today.
8. Past progressive	I was working outside.
9. Future progressive	I will be working by tonight.
10. Present perfect progressive	My life has not been working out.

11. Past perfect progressive   I had been working overtime.
12. Future perfect progressive   I will have been working at that store.

Structurally, the perfect tense is formed by adding (has, have, had) to the past participle.

Present Perfect Tense

Generally, the present perfect tense is one of the difficult tenses in English. In linguistics, the perfect tense is the past tense used to describe completed actions. (Azar,1989:200) stated that "the present perfect expresses the idea that something happened (or never happened) before now at an unspecified time in the past."

In other words, the present perfect is used to talk about actions that took place at the past time which has a very strong meaning to the present. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1. Shows present perfect simple timeline

Present perfect simple	Used to show unfinished time	She has studied English twice this week.

Actually, the present perfect tense is used to describe the present state of an event as a result of a past action (Frank, 2000: 77).

Forms of Present Perfect Tense
Structurally, the present perfect tense is easy to form and easy to be understood. Yet the problem occurs with the use of this type of tense. Focusing on the structure or the form, it is shown that present perfect tense has a form of "have/has" followed by past participle (Martinet, 1986:165). As any type of tenses, present perfect tense has three forms. They are as follow:

Affirmative sentences
To make a statement with an affirmative form with verbs other than (be), one has to follow the following formula (Quirk et al., 1985: 656):
  S+(has/have)+ past participle
  Examples:
  I/we/you/they have played football.

1. He/she/it has played football.
2. I/we/you/they have gone to the supermarket.
3. He/she/it has gone to the supermarket.

To make present perfect tense with the verb (be), the following formula has to be followed (ibid):

S+ (has/have)+ been+ ….
Examples:
1. I have been here for ages.
2. She has been in America since 1999.
3. Mr. Jack has been to Sydney.

Negative Sentences

To form a negative statement with verbs other than "be", one has to follow the following formula (ibid):

S+(has/have)+not+ past participle
Examples:
1. **Jane has not gone to her uncle.**
2. **They have not worked all the time.**

Whereas with the verb "be", negative statements have the following formula (ibid):

S+(has/have)+not+been…
Examples:
1. She has not been here for a month.
2. I have not been in the market.
3. They have not been married yet.

Interrogative

To form an interrogative statement with verbs other than "be", one has to follow the following formula:

Has/have+s+been+…?
Examples:
1. Have I/we/you/they played football?
2. Has he/she/it played football?
3. Have I/we/you/they gone to the supermarket?
4. Has he/she/it gone to the supermarket?

While to form questions with the verb "be", one has to follow the following formula (ibid):

Has/have+s+been…?

Examples:
1. Have they been here for three weeks?
2. Has Jane been to Egypt?

Uses of Present Perfect Tense

The Present Perfect is a combination of past and present. An action in the past has something to do with the present. As such, the following can be considered as the uses of this tense (Web Source 3):

1) Result of an action in the past is important in the present

(It is not important when this action happened. When using a specific time in the past - e.g. yesterday – then it is better to use the Simple Past.)
1. I have cleaned my room. (It is clean now.)
2. Has Peggy ever been to Tokyo? (Has Peggy been there or not?)

2) Recently completed actions

1. He has just played handball. (It is over now.)

3) Actions beginning in the past and still continuing - mostly with since (point of time) or for (period of time)

1. We have lived in Canada since 1996. (We still live there.)
2. We have lived in Canada for ten years (We still live there.)

4) Together with lately, recently, yet

1. I have been to London recently. (no specific point of time)
2. He has not written the e-mail yet. (He has not done it.)

The Test

Definition of a Test

A test or examination (informally, exam or evaluation) is an assessment intended to measure a test-taker's knowledge, skill, aptitude, physical fitness, or classification in many other topic (Aljubory,1999:1).

Test Virtues

Adequate tests are required to possess the two most important features of *reliability* and *validity*. (Ingram 1968: 70) affirms that "tests are only worth having if they measure accurately (i.e. Reliability) what you want them to measure (i.e. Validity)". These two qualities are discussed in the next two subsections.

Reliability

Test reliability refers to the degree to which a test is consistent and stable in measuring what it is intended to measure. Test reliability is related to the precision of the measurement that the test makes possible to the effect that the test results allow having confidence in them

(Bell, 1981: 199). In other words, reliability means the consistency with which a test measures the same thing all the time (Harrison, 1983: 11).

Validity

Validity means "how well a test actually measures what it is supposed to measure" (Lado, 1961: 32). For a test to be valid, it should be accurate in measuring what it is designed to measure. To achieve the validity of the test, it must meet the two criteria of *face* validity and *content* validity.

Face Validity

Face validity is concerned with the way the test looks to the educators, testers and the like (Mehrens and Lehmann, 1984: 295). Face validity occurs where something *appears* to be valid. This of course depends very much on the judgment of the observer. In any case, it is never sufficient and requires more solid validity to enable acceptable conclusions to be drawn (Aljubory ,1999 :26).

Content Validity

Content validity occurs when the experiment provides adequate coverage of the subject being studied. This includes measuring the right things as well as having an adequate sample. Samples should be both large enough and be taken for appropriate target groups. Content validity is related very closely to good experimental design. A high content validity question covers more of what is sought. A trick with all questions is to ensure that all of the target content is covered (preferably uniformly) (ibid:25).

Practically

Practically, the test does not coast a lot of money and time (ibid:28).

Error Analysis

The following findings are shown through analysing the test.

Students' performance at the recognition level

Table 1: The performance of the students at the recognition level (Question 1)

Items	No. of correct responses	Percentage	No. of incorrect responses	Percentage
1	33	82 %	7	18 %
2	15	38 %	25	62 %
3	15	38 %	25	62 %
4	30	75 %	10	25 %
5	21	52%	19	48 %
6	21	52 %	19	48 %
7	20	50 %	20	50 %
8	30	75 %	10	25 %
9	17	42 %	23	57 %
10	40	100 %	0	0 %
Total	**242**	**60.5 %**	**158**	**39.5 %**

Item (1) shows that students have (33) correct answers with a high a percentage (82%) while item (2 and 3) have (15) correct answers with a percentage of (38). In item (4) students answered (30) items with a percentage of (75). However, they have about (21) correct answers in (5) and (6) with 52%. There are about (20) students who answered item (7) correctly with (50%). Furthermore, a high percentage occurred with item (8). In that, there are about (75%) of students who answer it correctly. Yet, they failed in achieving a good result in item (9), i.e. only 42 % percent out of them who answered correctly. The highest percentage that ever occurred is with item (10) in that all students answered it correctly with 100 % percent.

Through this brief analysis, it is shown that most of Iraqi EFL learners have a good comprehension of the present perfect tense and they do not face problems in this regard. At the recognition level, there is about (60%) percent of students who answered the test perfectly.

Students' performance at the production level

Table 2: The performance of the students at the production level (Question 2)

Items	No. of correct responses	Percentage	No. of incorrect responses	Percentage
1	5	12 %	35	88 %
2	10	25 %	30	75 %
3	13	32 %	27	68 %
4	5	12 %	35	88 %
5	1	2 %	39	98 %
6	8	20 %	32	80 %
7	15	37 %	25	63 %
8	19	47 %	21	53 %
9	11	27 %	29	73 %
10	25	63 %	15	37 %
Total	**112**	**28 %**	**288**	**72 %**

Discussing the above percentages, it is shown that the most of the students fail in producing a correct grammatical sentence with present perfect tense, i.e. it has about 12 percent for the correct responses; whereas there are about 88 percent of students who fail to produce a grammatical sentence. Item (2) has 25 percent for the correct responses, while there are about 75 percent for incorrect responses. Item (3) has 32 percent for the correct responses, while there is about 68 percent for the incorrect responses. Item (4) has 12 percent for the correct responses, where 88 is the percent of the incorrect responses. Item (5) has 2 percent for the correct answer, whereas there are about 98 percent of students who do not know how to produce a grammatical sentence in present perfect tense. The last five items nearly have the same percentages. Actually, only about 10 percent who can answer the test correctly. Table (2) shows that the total percentage of the correct responses is (28%) while the total percentage of the incorrect responses is (72%). Due to these results, the first hypothesis is verified as, '*a significant number of Iraqi EFL learners at the university level face more difficulties in using present perfect tense on the production level than the recognition one*'.

These findings also verified the second hypothesis that states '*Mastery of the use of present perfect tense is not achieved by Iraqi learners over a   four-year period of EFL learning at the university level*'.

Conclusion

The paper has reached the following conclusions:

1. In teaching grammar, Iraqi EFL learner are given rules to be followed in understanding a certain subject, e.g., present perfect tense.

2. Present perfect tense is easy for Iraqi EFL learners to be deducting, yet the difficulty larks in uses.

3. Test results showed that Iraqi EFL learners do not face difficulties in recognising present perfect tense. As such, the first hypothesis is verified, '*A significant number of Iraqi EFL learners at the university level face more difficulties in using present perfect tense on the production level than the recognition one'*.

4. Through the results of the test for the second question, it is found that most of Iraqi EFL learners face a difficulty in producing sentences with present perfect tense. As it has been shown, such problems have their roots in the difficulty of uses. This conclusion also verifies the first hypothesis, '*A significant number of Iraqi EFL learners at the university level face more difficulties in using present perfect tense on the production level than the recognition one'*.

5. Applying the test on the fourth-class, students indicate that the four years of studying English is not enough for them to master the use of present perfect tense. Thereby, the second hypothesis is realised, i.e. '*Mastery of the use of present perfect tense is not achieved by Iraqi learners over a four-year period of EFL learning at the university level'*.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following:

1. **Extension of grammar to third- and fourth-year level**; extending the teaching of grammar to the third and fourth year is an urgent need; where it will give more opportunities to practice, understanding and using of present perfect tense.

2. **Collaborative teaching of grammar;** there should be a collaboration between all the teachers of all modules. Because teachers of grammar are supposed to endow their students with the different conventions, techniques, and rules that govern grammar.

3. **Teachers have to motivate their students to recognise and produce present perfect tense;** motivation is extremely necessary for students to achieve successfully their grammar tasks. Grammar topics in general should be interesting in the sense that they should match students' needs, levels, etc.

4. **Effective use of technology;** computers and internet connections have become more common in classrooms, using technology as a tool for learning can help students increase their capabilities to develop their grammar skills through improving their higher-order thinking skills.

5. **Effective use of selective correction;** this technique is a very good tool used in order to avoid the overuse of red ink all over the students' grammar productions. This requires teachers not to focus on all the aspects of grammar. If they employ a "selective approach", they should tell their students about it. For more details, please read. Effective use of feedback; teachers of all levels and modules should be aware about the advantages of feedback and the ways it is used. No doubt that students are interested in marks and nothing else, but feedback-comments reinforce students to improve their grammar level. Feedback-comments are meant to highlight weaknesses and/or strengths.

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Other Electronic Sources

1.   http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/presentperfect.html#introduction.
2.   http://www.learnenglish.de/grammar/tensepresperfsim.htm.
3.   http://www.fortunecity.com/bally/153/gramch06.html.

Appendix (1)
The Test

The following test is given to the fourth class students/ English Department/ Babylon University.

Q1/ Choose the correct item.
1. Lindsay _____ not been to France.

  ⭕ has

  ⭕ is

  ⭕ have

2. _____ you finished your homework?

  ⭕ Have

  ⭕ Has

  ⭕ Is

3. They___ gone to a rock concert.

  ⭕ 's

  ⭕ 'es

  ⭕ 've

4. _____ you been to Japan?

  ⭕ Is

  ⭕ Have

  ⭕ Has

5. We _____ never eaten Mexican food.

  ⭕ have

  ⭕ has

  ⭕ are

6. Andrea has _____ her umbrella.

  ⭕ forget

  ⭕ forgetting

  ⭕ forgotten

7. _____ the sun come up?

○ Was

○ Have

○ Has

8. The children _____ the lost puppy.

○ have   find

○ is   finding

○ have found

9. Wiwi's been a vegetarian _____ three years.

○ since

○ for

○ after

10. I haven't worked _____ last December.

○ since

○ for

○ by

Q2/ **Make sentences Using the following verbs in the present perfect tense.**
1. Eat
2. Be
3. Give
4. Meet
5. Visit
6. Learn
7. Witness
8. Break
9. Hold
10. Swim

Appendix (2)
The Correct Answers
Q1/ Choose the correct item.
1. Has
2. Have
3. 've
4. Have
5. Have

6. Forgotten
7. Has
8. Have found
9. Since
10. Since

`Q2/ Make sentences using the following verbs in the present perfect tense.

1. I have eaten my dinner just now.
2. I have been on stage.
3. I have given blood.
4. She has met a famous person.
5. They have visited a safari park.
6. I have learnt another language.
7. I have witnessed a crime.
8. He has broken a bone.
9. I have held a snake.
10. I have swum in the ocean.