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THE USE OF TENSES IN THE IRAQI ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS' WRITINGS: AN ERROR ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *Iraqi EFL learners study English for almost about eight years before joining the university; for the last four years in the high school, they are exposed to English tenses regularly and intensively. Besides, when they join the departments of English at the university level, they intensively study English for other four years. The designed curriculum is tense-teaching oriented. Grammar is taught with an amount of three hours a week for thirty weeks annually during these four years. Yet, Iraqi EFL learners suffer from serious problems in some grammatical points such as tenses and their uses.*

The present paper is a data-analysis-based study that aims to identify the grammatical errors, their nature, types, and sources. It is hypothesized here, first, that Iraqi EFL learners tend to commit errors in verb-forms and use of tenses. Second, these errors could be due to several causes basically related to L1 interference.

To achieve the objectives behind the study and validate its hypotheses, an error analysis has been made for Fourth Year EFL classes final exam writings of the Dept. of English/College of Arts/ University of Kufa. The representative sample is all the available writings in compositional subjects where students are expected to feel free and spontaneous to write concentrating on concepts and ideas rather than linguistic points. Only then could students be expected to commit unconscious mistakes that reveal their competence in the use of tenses.

The paper is expected to be of value for EFL teachers, syllabus designers, translators to and fro English, and psycholinguistic grammarians who seek identifying competence.

Key words: *applied linguistics, error analysis, EFL, English tenses, advanced learners.*

1. Introduction

Tense is one of the grammatical categories in English. It always goes hand-in-hand with some other categories such as aspect and mood and some notions such as time and modality. Tenses in English are said to be just two: present and non-present or past. Either of these tenses could be in the perfective and/or progressive aspects. Yet, only could present tense be in the subjunctive mood, under certain circumstances.

Typically, tense in English is expressed by the verb-form in a sentence. Hence, past, present, and future times are

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expressed by particular verb-forms. While there is a specific verb-form to express present and past times, there is no specific morphologically distinct verb-form to express future time. The latter could be expressed by any of the simple or progressive present verb-forms, some modal verbs such as *will* and *shall*, or even by some past verb-forms. Since there is no particular morphological future verb-form in English, it is said that there is no future tense but only a future time.

For Larsen-Freeman [12], linguistic knowledge and description of language system is, in fact, an essential set out for a pedagogical grammar. A pedagogical grammar then can operationally be defined as "a system of meaningful structures and patterns that are governed by particular pragmatic constraints" [12]. This suggests three basic dimensions for a grammar to be used in language learning and teaching: form, meaning, and use. As for tenses, a learner needs to know the grammatical meaning of communicating something with a specific verb-form and the proper way that form is used. Learners need to know how to form a specific tense, what its meaning is, and how to use it properly in the different situations.

Mastering tenses and their uses in English has a significant role in the entire process of communication. Yet, EFL learners of English suffer much while they try to do so. The present study is designed to be of a practical nature that avoids any theoretical trespass of its own limits; it is a diagnostic effort that aims at highlighting one of the problems in EFL learning and teaching in Iraq.

Iraqi EFL learners study English for almost about eight years before joining the university; for the last four years in the high school, they are exposed to English tenses regularly and intensively. Besides, when they join the departments of English at the university level, they intensively study English for other four years. The designed curriculum is tense-teaching oriented. Grammar is taught with an amount of three hours a week for almost thirty weeks annually during these four years. Accordingly, it is hypothesized here, first, that Iraqi EFL learners tend to commit errors in verb-forms and use of tenses. Second, these errors could be due to several causes basically related to L1 interference.

As it is believed that students are expected to feel free and spontaneous to write in compositional subjects of literary courses concentrating on concepts and ideas rather than linguistic points, a representative sample of all the available writings in two such courses, via Poetry and Literary Criticism, of the University of Kufa/ College of Arts/ Dept. of English Language / Fourth Year EFL classes' final examinations of the academic year 2010/2011 are to be subjected to an error analysis in order to achieve the objectives behind the present study and validate its hypotheses.

The paper is expected to be of value for EFL teachers, syllabus designers, translators to and fro English, and psycholinguistic grammarians who seek identifying competence

2. Time, Tense, and the Verb-form

2.1. Tense, Aspect, and Mood

The term 'tense' derives, via Old French, from the Latin translation of the Greek word for 'time' (Greek *khrónos*, Latin *tempus*). The category of tense has to do with time-relations in so far as these are expressed by systematic grammatical contrasts. Three such contrasts were recognized by traditional grammarians in the analysis of Greek and Latin; 'past', 'present', and 'future'; it has often been supposed that the same three-way opposition of tense is a universal feature of

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language. However, this is not so. In fact, tense itself is not found in all languages and the opposition of past, present, and future is not simply a matter of tense even in Greek and Latin [14].

The essential characteristic of the category of tense is that it relates the time of the action, event, or state of affairs referred to in the sentence to the time of utterance being 'now'. Hence, tense is a deictic category [14]. It, in this sense, is basically used to locate an event or action at the scale of time by virtue of a specific verb-form. The primary use of the present tense, for instance, is to locate the situation in the present time "where 'situation' is to be understood as a general term covering states, actions, processes, or whatever is described in the clause" [9].

Many treatments of tense have been vitiated by the assumption that the 'natural' division of time into 'past', 'present', and 'future' is necessarily reflected in language. Considering the 'now of the utterance' to be the 'theoretical zero point', grammarians correlate this point to what might precede or follow. Various dichotomies have accordingly been proposed: like 'past *vs.* non-past', 'future *vs.* non-future', present *vs.* non-present, now *vs.* non-now' [14], or 'now *vs.* remote'; all are alternative terminology [3].

The distinction of past, present, and future times is, thus, essential to the notion of tense in a language. The future is believed to be like the past except that it follows rather than precedes the present in the 'infinitely extensible unidimensional continuum of time' [15]. For Lyons [15], futurity is not a purely temporal concept; it necessarily includes some element of prediction or some modal notion; past tense, however, has this temporal sense of concept, from the viewpoint of the language users' experience and conceptualization. This idea might give rise to the significance of both aspect and modality as two means of correlating the different times and the various tenses as verb-forms in English. For the correlations of tense, aspect, and mood can then be explained in terms of the different temporal locations of an event. Hence, differences between past, present, and future tenses are inherently correlated with differences in aspect and mood. There is, for instance, a correlation between future tense and non-actual potential mood as an event that could occur after the moment of speech is in fact non-actual and potential. Similarly, there is a correlation between present tense and progressive/incomplete/ imperfective aspect because an event that is ongoing at the moment of speech has not completed yet. Sequences of such correlations can be expressed in English, for example, by certain morphosyntactic verb-forms that might have wider modal and aspectual functions [2].

Futurity, according to Lyons [14], is as much a matter of mood as it is as tense. It is, then, possible to talk about predictions in the past as well as temporal concepts in the future through the use of past, present, and future aspects, whether progressive or perfective, with or without modals.

Here comes, on the one hand, the powerful expressiveness of English as it can correlate certain situations around a specific point of time whether in the past, present, or future. On the other hand, it seems difficult for EFL learners to master this highly correlated system of time-tense-aspect relationships. Tense locates events in time; aspect characterizes the internal temporal structure of events; mood, further, describes the actuality of those events in terms such as possibility, necessity, or desirability. These are all grammatical categories that further specify or characterize the basic prediction referred to as 'event' [2].

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2.2. Tenses in English

The verb phrase can be thought of as the 'heart' or 'centre' of the sentence in English. Verbs provide crucial lexical and grammatical meanings to a sentence; they express what the subject does or describe something about the state or condition of the subject [4]. Verbs have a different set of features which are often associated with them. These features include *tense, aspect,* and *modality*. Tense is a functional category or an exclusive verb feature that serves some abstract grammatical purpose [6]. Tense refers to the marking of the time when something happened relative to now, aspect, roughly speaking, refers to whether an event is viewed as completed or on-going, while modality refers to expressing something about the reality or otherwise of an event. An instance of the first is the past/present distinction in English, of the second is perfective/progressive distinction while of the third is the indicative/ subjunctive distinction in verb-forms in languages like French and Spanish [13].

Eventually, grammatical errors might threaten the learner's understanding of the sentence and the semantic-syntactic relationships that stand by virtue of the verb phrase and its features among the sentence constituents. This type of error is what Vavra [21] calls syntactic errors and states that they affect the reader's comprehension of what was written or said. *Al-Khalidi* [11] states,

> Some writers call the syntactic errors like subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, dangling and misplaced modifiers, sentence fragments and shifting in tense and voice as 'sentence errors' like Waldhorn and Zeiger (1981: 53)and ; Allen (1995: 5). Other writers call such errors 'a problem in sentence structures' like Vivian and Jackson (1963: 231); Kinsella (1968: 135); Dodge (1970: 71) and Kroll (1991: 260)

However, there is no one-to-one correspondence between tenses as verb-forms and time. Depending on context, present tense in English, for instance, may help refer to future or past time [3]. Swan [20], in this respect thinks that there is no direct relationship between verb-forms and time in the real world; rather, there is a correspondence between time and grammatical features of the verbs [4]. Events often do not fit neatly into categories of past, present, and future time. English uses a variety of structures to express different time references.

If tenses are defined as verb-forms, i.e. morphologically inflected forms for specific functions, it becomes a matter of debate whether a language like English has a future tense at all: constructions such as *I will/shall go*, according to many, are best analyzed as involving modal auxiliary verbs expressing different grammatical functions (e.g. the expression of intension or obligation, which often involve futurity) [4]. Hence, the number of tenses in English is an interesting question that Galasso [6] discusses at more than one level. Almost all modern grammarians do agree that English has just two. Accordingly, the argument that English has a future tense relies on a confusion about the notion of referential time/tense, i.e. tense in relation to the real world, as compared to the grammatical time/tense distinction; the former belonging to semantics (and perhaps pragmatics) while the latter exclusively belongs to the functional category of tense morphology [+/-past] [6].

In English, for instance, a past verb-form like *went* is not only used to talk about past events, as in (1) below, but also about unreal or uncertain present or future events as in (2) below:

(1) We *went* to Morocco last January.
(2) It would be better if we *went* home now.

Present verb-forms can be used to talk about the future, as in:

(3) I'*m seeing* Peter tomorrow.

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Further, progressive and perfective forms usually express ideas that are not simply concerned with time, for example continuation, completion or present importance [20]. This suggests that English verbs can refer to future, present, or past times as in:

(4) Future: She *will see* you tomorrow.
(5) Present: I'*m watching* you.
(6) Past: who *said* so?

And that, for each kind of time, there are three possibilities with most verbs: simple, progressive (be + -ING[i]), and perfective (have + past participle) as in:

(7) Simple: I *start*.
(8) Present progressive: I *am starting*.
(9) Present perfective: I *have started*.

As shown in these examples, progressive forms, on the one hand, describe an event as going on or continuing at or up to a particular time, compare:

(10) I can't talk to you, I *am working*.
(11) When you phoned, I *was working* in the garage.
(12) I was tired because I *had been working* all day.

On the other hand, the perfective forms suggest a relationship between a past event and the present or between an earlier and a later past event, or to say that something was/is/will be completed by a particular time, consider the examples below [20]:.

(13) I'*ve worked* with children before, so I know what to expect in my new job.
(14) After I *had worked* with Jack for few weeks, I felt I know him pretty well.
(15) I *will have worked* for ten hours by suppertime.

As an important structure that functions together with tense, aspect is apparently a grammatical category that indicates temporal features such as duration, frequency, and completion. It is formally indicated by complex tenses, or verb-forms, that are composed of an auxiliary verb (past or present) + a particular form (past or present participle) of the main verb. Accordingly, there are two different aspects in English: progressive and perfective. When *be* combines with the present participle of main verbs, the verb phrase shows the *progressive* aspect but when *have* combines with the past participle of the main verb, the verb phrase shows the *perfective* aspect [4]. Otherwise, the tense is simple.

2.3. The Model of Analysis

The present study has adopted an eclectic model of analysis based on two famous English grammar source-books: Quirk et. Al. [18] and Biber et al [1]. The first is said to adopt a formal-functional eclectic approach while the latter is a corpus-based approach to English grammar; while the former is theoretically significant for this study, the latter represents a new trend in the practical grammatical description of language.

From a formal/structural viewpoint, English verbs are inflected only for two tenses: past and present. However, many verb phrases are not *marked* for tense as it is the case in imperative, subjunctive, and non-finite clauses. Present tense is morphologically unmarked except for the suffix –S in the 3rd person singular; past tense, mainly for regular verbs, is marked with the suffix –ED[1].

A finite verb phrase is simple when it consists of only one word which may be present or past, imperative, or subjunctive [18]. Simple verb-forms include (1) the base form, as in *call*, *speak*, *cut* ,etc., which is used for present tense in all persons and numbers except 3rd person singular, imperative, and subjunctive mood; (2) the –S form used in present tense in 3rd person singular; and (3) the past form which occurs in the past tense [18].

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In complex verb phrases, however, there are four types of construction:

(1) *Type A*: a modal auxiliary + the base of a verb, as in *must examine*.

(2) *Type B*: perfective consisting from the auxiliary HAVE + the –ED participle of a verb, as in *has examined*.

(3) *Type C*: progressive consisting of the auxiliary BE + the –ING participle of a verb, as in *is examining*.

(4) *Type D*: passive consisting of the auxiliary BE + the –ED participle of a verb, as in *is examined*.

Evidently, the two aspects are structurally distinguished as follows: perfective aspect is marked by the auxiliary HAVE + -ED participle while the progressive aspect is marked by the auxiliary BE + -ING participle [1].

These four basic constructions can enter with each other into combinations of a specific order [18]:

- AB: *may have examined*
- AC: *may be examining*
- AD: *may be examined*
- BC: *has been examining*
- BD: *has been examined*
- CD: *is being examined*
- ABC: *may have been examining*
- ABD: *may have been examined*
- ACD: *may be being examined*
- BCD: *has been being examined*
- ABCD: *may have been being examined*

These forms serve different functions in their verb phrases and express different meanings. They also explain, in a way, the argument on the number of tenses in English in terms of form. Traditionally, grammarians believe that English could have as many as twelve active tenses and other twelve passive ones [5]. This is what Swan [20] explains in terms of different active verb-forms. He [20] seems to multiply the three tenses [*sic.*] in English (past, present, and future) by the four different basic combinations of aspects (simple, perfective, progressive, and perfective progressive), *Types A-D* above. Consequently, a present tense, for instance, could be simple, perfective, progressive, or perfective progressive; each of which is considered as a new tense.

In fact, it is "aspect [which] is *so* closely connected in meaning with tense *that* the distinction in English grammar between tense and aspect is little more than a terminological convenience which helps us separate in our minds two different kinds of realisation: the morphological realisation of tense and the syntactic realisation of aspect"[18], consider Table 1 below:

The past/present tense distinction can be semantically reconsidered. As the categories of tense, aspect, and mood can, to a great extent, 'impinge' into each other, Quirk and Greenbaum [17] identify the two simple tenses of present and past in relation to the other complex verb-forms. Accordingly, present times can be semantically expressed by the present simple or progressive tense while past times can be expressed by any of the present perfective, past simple, past progressive, past perfective, or past perfective progressive. The determinant factor in choosing any of these verb-forms is a matter of *use*. Each has its own uses and meanings. EFL learners then should be not only aware of the functions and purpose behind the use of each verb-form but they should also master the use of that verb-form in relation to its context. In any given context, the meaning of one of tense, aspect, or mood may be more precisely specified, or determined, by the adverb or adverbial phrases to which it is systematically related in the sentence [14].

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Table 1

The Combination of Tense and Aspect in English

Symbol	Name	Example
B	present perfective (simple) past perfective (simple)	He has examined He had examined
C	present progressive (simple) past progressive (simple)	He is examining He was examining
BC	present perfective progressive past perfective progressive	He has been examining He had been examining

3. The Use of Tense in Iraqi EFL Learners' Writing

3.1. The Grammatical Background of the Sample

According to the Iraqi Educational System, Iraqi pupils are exposed to English as Foreign Language (EFL) for a minimum of eight academic years before joining university, i.e. Higher Education and Scientific Research[ii]. They begin to study English as early as the Fifth Primary Class, normally at the age of ten. Finishing the Sixth Primary Class, they join Secondary School for six years, three of which are Intermediate and the other three are Preparatory. Throughout these *eight* years, pupils attend English lessons 5-6 periods a week; each is of a minimum of forty-five minutes, see Table 2 below.

The syllabus designed for teaching EFL in Iraq is 'The New Course for Iraq' (NECI); it is a series of *eight* books numbered Book I through Book VIII, a book for each academic year. This textbook has been continuously revised since it was first formally assigned in 1968[iii] [7]. Generally, the series is based on an oral-aural structural pedagogical approach with some functional implications (see items 3, 4, and 5 in Table 3 below). It is said to have certain features such as being [7]:

a. experimental in nature
b. language book rather than a reader
c. heavily relying on planning
d. horizontally and vertically integrated
e. emphasizing meaningful situations
f. of certain cultural elements, etc.

The term *grammar* is used in the NECI to mean the study of the phonological, morphological, and the syntactic systems of English. Grammar in the first five books is presented in the pupils' book devoid of rules and technical terms, i.e. in a form of oral language usage patterns with no complicated rules. However, this does not mean that teachers may *not* explain patterns to pupils. On the contrary, before any intensive language drill, the nature of the practiced pattern should be fully understood by pupils and well-explained by the teacher but not at the expense of practicing the pattern.

Tenses are presented as early as Book III (1st Intermediate Class). Past simple, past continuous, present perfective, simple future tenses, if-clauses, time clauses, and clauses of concession are used in Book III in forms of patterns. Yet, only in Books VI to VIII are structure notes systematically used [7]. This means that pupils are familiar with tenses directly or indirectly throughout almost the whole series. In fact, they are taught tenses and aspects at all levels of learning EFL there. This is proved by the jury, consider items 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9 in Table 3 below.

Therefore, Iraqi EFL learners are exposed to English as long as a minimum of 1170-1230 hours during the pre-university stages of learning the language.

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Besides, they are exposed to an average of 360 periods of tense-based grammar courses during the four thirty-week academic years they spend in the university.

One of the reasons behind the weaker levels of students' mastery of the basic grammatical points, including tenses, is believed to be the NECI. Seven jury members of expert teachers at both the pre-university and university levels of teaching English in the Iraqi institutes, have stated that the NECI does not meet needs of the Iraqi EFL learners *at all* although it is said to be *always* revised to cope with such needs.

3.2. The Sample

The present study is an error analysis investigating the Iraqi EFL advanced learners' errors in writing. Those learners are the Fourth Year students / Morning Classes in the Department of English Language/College of Arts/University of Kufa for the academic year 2010/2011.

The Class includes seventy-seven students; fifteen of them have been excluded because they failed the previous year and repeated the present class. Sixty-two final-exam copybooks have been formally borrowed from the Examination Committee of the target academic year. They include the students' copybooks of two literary courses, viz Poetry and Literary Criticism. The total number of the copybooks was then 124 copybooks in both courses with sixty-two copybooks for each course.

The Examination Committee has arbitrarily given these copybooks numbers for the sake of correcting them by instructors. Hence, the copybooks were put into order accordingly then every third copybook has been systematically selected out of the copybooks of each course. The final random systematic sample then includes forty-two copybooks: twenty-one copybooks in Poetry and another twenty-one in Literary Criticism. Such courses have been chosen due to the belief that students feel free to write and use language in literary rather than linguistic courses. Students in both courses faced two types of question: objective, such as MCQ, and subjective, such as writing essays; only does latter seem to suit the purpose of this study. Accordingly, answers of Q1, Q4, and/or Q5 in Poetry and those of Q2, Q3, and/or Q5 in Literary Criticism have been analyzed. The total number of the analyzed answers has been eighty-five because some students have left out some of the subjective questions.

The Amount of Iraqi Pupils' Exposure to EFL Table 2

Grade	Book No.	Hours per week	Average of Hours per Year
5th Primary Class	I	4	120
6th Primary Class	II	4	120
1st Intermediate Class	III	6	180
2nd Intermediate Class	IV	5	150
3rd Intermediate Class	V	5	150
4th Secondary Class	VI	5	150
5th Secondary Class	VII	5-6	150-180 [iv]
6th Secondary Class	VIII	5-6	150-180
Total exposure during the eight years			1170-1230

From al-Hamash (1984:15-6)

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Questionnaire Items as Approved by the Jury Table 3

No	Questionnaire Items	Yes	No	Agree
1.	The NECI is basically designed to meet the Iraqi EFL learners' need	0	7	0 %
2.	The series has always been revised to cope with learners' needs.	1	6	14.3%
3.	The eight books of the series are designed in a structural pedagogy.	6	1	85.7%
4.	They are formally designed in essence.	4	3	57.1%
5.	They have enough functional implications.	1	6	14.3%
6.	Tenses are only implicitly taught at the Intermediate School	2	5	28.6%
7.	Tenses are explicitly taught at the Preparatory School	5	2	71.5%
8.	Past, present, and future tenses are overtly taught at different levels	4	3	57.1%
9.	Simple, progressive and perfective aspects are implicitly or explicitly taught.	5	2	71.5%
10.	Arabic is *often* used to explain English tenses and rules	5	2	71.5%
11.	English tenses are often taught in comparison with those in Arabic	2	5	28.6%
12.	Pupils master tenses as use and usage before the final exams	1	6	14.3%
13.	Pupils memorize forms of tenses only *occasionally* for final exams	7	0	100%
14.	Pupils *always* tend not to show mastery over tenses	5	2	71.5%
15.	Pupils, throughout the five periods a week, think of tenses in Arabic	6	1	85.7%

3.3. The Procedures

3.3.1. Unit of Analysis

The answer of every question in the sample has been described in terms of a text. 'Text' here refers to any extension of writing beyond sentence and could function as an answer to the proposed question. Each text has been analysed into clauses that consist of two main clause-constituents: noun phrase (NP) and verb phrase (VP). The main word-types involved in the analysis are auxiliary verbs as functional words and full/main verbs as lexical/content words.

One of the problems that faced the analysis is the identification of sentence- or clause- boundaries. Almost all sentences in answers were not punctuated. Thus, six or more lines have been found written with no initial capital, comma, or full-stop; a complete written sentence, as a group of words beginning with a capital letter and ending with a full-stop, can rarely be found there. The number of sentences per text, then, cannot be reliable and so is the number of clauses per sentence or text.

The solution for that has been to divide texts into parts according to idea-distribution so that a new sentence could be recognized at each idea-shift. As for clause-identification, a clause could be recognized as a combination of NP + VP. The number of combinations, thus, could represent the number of clauses per text regardless the length of the sentence that contains such combinations and whether that sentence is simple, compound, or complex. This implies that the number of clauses is as the same as that of VPs in the text.

3.3.2. The Analysis

A five-column table has been devised to contain the number of copybook, question number, number of the VPs, tense of each VP, and the types of error that could be

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found. Fitted into that table, the eighty-five answers have been divided into two main lists, one for Poetry and another for Literary Criticism. A total of 1513 clauses in both Poetry and Literary Criticism have been analyzed for their tenses.

3.4. Discussion of Results

The analysis has shown frequencies of uses of tense, aspect, mood, and voice. Further, different types of error have been detected in the sample as respectively shown in Tables 4 and 5 below:

Table 4

Frequency of Tenses, Aspects, Voices, and Moods Used by the Learners

* Frequency of using BE = 385
** Frequency of using V = 1128

				Tense				Total	
				Past		Present			
				F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
Mood	Indicative	Modal		24	21.62	87	78.38	111	7.34
		Aspect	Simple	334	24.76	1015	75.24	1349	89.16
			Perfective	18	45	22	55	40	2.64
			Progressive	0	0	10	100	10	0.66
			Perfective progressive	0	0	3	100	3	0.20
		Total		376	24.85	1137	75.15	1513	100
	Subjunctive	0						0	0
Voice		Active		358	24.30	1115	75.70	1473	97.36
		Passive		18	45	22	55	40	2.64
		Total		376	24.85	1137	75.15	1513	100

3.4.1. Uses

The analyzed 1513 clauses have been investigated for their mood, aspects, tenses, and voices, see Table 4 below. Accordingly these percentages have shown the following:

1. The only mood used by the students is the indicative; no single instance has been found in the subjective at all. Hence, there is no need to restate every time we refer to clauses that they are in the indicative mood.
2. VPs with modals have recorded 7.34% of the total use of VPs. These modals have been found in the sample in their past verb-forms , such as could, should, would, and might, with a percentage of 21.62% compared to 78.38% modal verbs in the present form, such as can, will, must, may, and ought to.
3. The simple VPs have recorded the highest frequency in students' use of tenses. A total of 89.16% out of students' tenses have been in the simple tense. Past tense has recorded 24.76% compared to 75.24% present tense in the simple form.
4. As for aspects, the perfective aspect has been found in only 2.64% of the sample clauses. Out of this low percentage, past perfective has recorded 45% compared to 55% present perfective. Progressive aspect has recorded a lower percentage,

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0.66%, while perfective progressive aspect has recorded the lowest being 0.20% out of the entire clauses; no past perfective or past perfective progressive has been found and only ten instances of present progressive and three instances of the present perfective progressive tense have been found in the 1513 clauses of the sample. This indicates that students might tend to express any temporal relation via explanation and the use or simple tense expressions only. As their writings did not show this evidently, students in the sample seem to be unaware of the way English tenses can express time relationships.

5. The total number of the clauses used in the past tense has been (24.85%) compared to (75.15%)of the clauses in the present tense. This, in fact characterizes the analyzed texts as being descriptive in nature, whether it shows simple present or past tense.
6. The use of passive voice has been found to be limited. Only 2.64% out of the students' entire clauses has been in the passive while 97.36% of them has been used in active voice; 45% of the former were in the past compared to 55% in the present tense. Yet, 24.30% of the latter were in the past compared to 75.70% in the present tense. This characterizes the text to be literary rather than scientific as it tends to show active rather than passive voice. Yet, the percentage of passive is still low.

Hence, in a descriptive literary text wherein students feel free to express themselves in a presumably explicit and transparent way, the EFL students do not use all resources that the English tenses make available to write in good English.

3.4.2. Errors

In their use of tense, aspect, mood, and voice in both affirmative and negative clauses written by Iraqi EFL learners' errors in the sample can be categorized into three types: shift, wrong verb-forms, and verb omission which represent 43.82%, 41.85%, 14.33% of the total respectively, see Table 5 below.

Table 5

Ranks of Error Types Percentage

Rank	Type of Error	Freq	%
1	Shift	**156**	**43.82**
2	Verb-form	**149**	**41.85**
3	Verb Omission	**51**	**14.33**
Total		**356**	**100**

3.4.2.1. Shift

Shift in tense, aspect, and voice has been detected beside wrong verb-forms, such as concord, and missing auxiliary and main verbs in their VPs, as shown in Table 6 below. Language users have the right to shift from one tense, aspect, mood, or voice according to the intended meaning they have in mind and the situation they are in or they want to express via the whole process of communication. Yet, the shift detected here seems unjustifiable and unsystematic, whether conscious or unconscious. Thus, in sentences like the following, the student does not have the right to shift systematically from one tense to the other:

(16) * He *described* four people the first one *is* lady *was* sacrificed by her voice. (Copybook 27, Q4 Poetry)

(17) *W. B. Yeats *used* many symbols… He *uses* the 'fire' as a symbol of…. (Copybook 10, Q4 Poetry)

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(18) *The poem *was* written by … which *is* titled…(Copybook 13, Q1 Poetry)

Apparently, this type of shift is by no means justified. Besides, shift has taken place in the same sentence as in (18), or even in the same clause, as in (16), which is an error itself. Shift is sometimes seen in voice as well, as in the following examples:

(19) *In the morning, she *was shouting* in demonstrations and in the evening she *was argued* about their rights. (Copybook 3, Q4 Poetry)

(20) *The drummers *consider* too young to fight. (Copybook 30, Q1 Poetry)

These examples show the way students commit this type of shift; so, they are used with asterisk to indicate that they are ungrammatical[v].

Three different types of shift have been found:

1. Tense-shift

This type of shift, in turn, has shown two sub-types according to shift direction: past-to-present and present-to-past. The students who tend to shift from past to present have represented a minor group of only 10.34% of the sample while the majority tend to shift from present to past, 89.66% of the sample. It seems that students are unaware of the danger of tense-shift.

As for the shift to past tense, there could be a lower level of mastery over tenses and therefore students shift to the tense that is said to be acquired first, i.e. past tense. This seems reasonable in view of the characterization that "children's first productions of English past tense or plural forms are generally correct, regardless of whether those forms are regular (e.g., ***walked*** or ***glasses)*** or irregular (e.g., ***went*** or ***sheep")***[16]. Child performance then witnesses a period when irregular forms are incorrectly inflected and errors occur, as in ***goed*** or ***sheeps.*** Later on, the tendency to make such errors decreases just to cope with the predominant regular pattern in the inflectional system of English [16]. When the English-speaking children begin to morphologically mark verbs, they tend to use the –ED past tense morpheme.

2. Aspect-shift

According to direction again, four subtypes of aspect-shift has been identified: simple-to-perfective, simple-to-progressive, perfective-to-simple, and past perfective to present perfective with percentages of occurrence recording 0%, %45.45, 45.45%, and 9.10 % respectively. No simple-to-perfective aspect-shift has been identified. Simple-to-progressive and perfective-to-simple aspect-shifts have remarkably been found equal. Yet, the lowest percentage of shift has been found in past perfective to present perfective aspect-shift.

The total percentage of errors in aspect-shift which is 3.08%, compared to the frequency of using aspect being 3.50% of the total use of VPs in the sample, seems catastrophic. The correct use of aspects has recorded only 0.42% out of the total use of tenses and aspects. This, beyond dispute, reflects the *deteriorated* level of acquisition that students have in the use of English aspect.

3. Voice-shift

This type of error has only represented 8.15% of the total errors committed by the students in the sample. Compared to the percentage of using voice 2.64% out of the

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total number of use, this area of tense seems so erroneous. Out of the fourteen sentences in the passive voice there has been twenty-nine wrong ones with voice-shift.

Two subtypes of voice-shift have been identified: active-to-passive and passive-to-active shift, recording 24.14% and 75.86% respectively. This may be interpreted in terms of mastering the use of simple VPs. Students tends to use simple rather than complex VPs; this may be a strategy for avoiding committing errors; however, the types of error provide enough evidence on the students' serious weak-nesses in using tense, aspect, and mood.

3.4.2.2. Verb-form

Errors in verb–forms seem so interesting. They can be subdivided into three types: those in concord and in the structure of the VP. The number of subjects determines the number of verbs and words that intervene between the subject and its verb do not affect the number of the verb [19]. Subject-verb concord represents a source of error for the EFL students in the sample when they use simple present tense. Whether the subject is singular or plural in number, students sometimes use the present verb-form with or without the 3rd person singular –S. An –S has been found to be annexed to verbs used with plural subjects in a percentage of 18.12% of the errors in verb-forms. On the contrary, a verb that requires an –S could be found without it; missing –S represents (61.74%) of such errors. Besides, BE forms have been found where singular forms, such as *is* and *was* are replacing plural ones, such as *are* and *were*. This type of error represents a lower percentage of 4.70% of the errors in verb-form.

The total number of errors in verb-form has been found to be 41.85% of the entire amount of errors committed by the students, see Table 5 above. This reflects the lesser mastery of students over the use of simple present tense. This, in turn, justifies the unconscious present-to-past tense-shift, (*cf.* 3.4.2.1, point 1 above). Students, hence, have committed lower percentages in past-to-present tense-shift 10.34% compared to 89.66% of present-to-past tense-shift. As far as errors in complex VPs are concerned, 15.44% of verb-forms have been found wrong. Out of this percentage, 13% of the errors were committed in past tense, as in:

(21) …. was lived……(= lived)
(Copybook 3 Q1 poetry)

(22) …. written…… (= wrote)
(Copybook 30 Q1 poetry)

(23) …didn't concerned (was not concerned)(Copybook 42, Q5 Criticism)

About 87% of verb-form errors, however, were committed in the present tense, as in examples below:

(24) … is fight… (= fights)
(Copybook 3 Q1 poetry)

(25) …is talk… (talks)
(Copybook 37 Q2 Criticism)

(26) …can to do…(= can do)
(Copybook 13 Q1 poetry)

(27) …is…will be...? (=will be?)
(Copybook 13 Q1 poetry)

(28) …is may be better…(= may be better/ is better)(Copybook 31 Q3 Criticism)

(29) …do not harmony…(does not show harmony)

(30) …has appears…(=has appeared)
(Copybook 10 Q1 poetry)

(31) ...Does I have…? (=Do I have…?)
(Copybook 39 Q1 poetry)

(32) …coupled…(are coupled)
(Copybook 46 Q3 Criticism).

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3.4.2.3. Verb Omission

Two types of verbs have been identified to be omitted from the VPs written by the students: verb BE as an auxiliary and the main verb of the clause, including verb BE. In fact, auxiliary verbs BE, DO, and HAVE have been sought in the sample but only the first has been detected with a frequency of thirty-nine out of the total number of errors, 356, with a percentage of 10.96%, as in the examples below:

(33) In passive constructions like: repeated/thrown away, etc. (-BE)
(34) In progressive constructions like: limiting and standing (-BE)

Out of the 1513 analyzed clauses there has been 385 clauses with BE as a main verb and 1128 clauses with other main verbs. Only *five* clauses have occurred with a missing main verb and *seven* missing BE. The number of verbless clauses seems insignificant for the purpose of the present study; yet, it refers to the idea that students are highly aware of the fact that there is no English complete clause without a verb.

3.4.2.4. Negative and Interrogative

All the clauses that have been already analyzed in the previous section are in positive declarative forms of the indicative mood. The sample has shown no distinct uses of negative or interrogative clauses. The only two interrogative clauses, example numbers (27) and (31) above, have been found wrong with a percentage of 100%.

The negative sentences used have been only twelve, nine of them have been written with wrong complex verb phrases. These are listed below, in addition to examples (23) and (29) mentioned above. This could be another evidence that the students do not have the ability to use the other forms of VPs, whether these VPs are simple or complex. The errors below could indicate that the students have come to know English in a rote-learning traditional way and they are still unable to develop their own morphological or syntactic system, (See also [16]).

(35) …didn't gave….
(36) …do not gave……
(37) …do not have skilled…..
(38) …do not developed….
(39) ….is not began…
(40) …do not success….
(41) …do not useful….
(42) …will not forgotten…
(43) …didn't concerned….

Accordingly, the level of tense acquisition of the Iraqi EFL learners seems to be in its earlier stages and it actually lack the practice required to coping with the system. Agreeing with the jury's responses to items 10 -15 (Table (4) above), the researcher thinks that students have not been used to mastering tenses because Arabic is often used to explain English tenses and rules. Therefore, they even do not master tenses as use and usage before the final exams as they memorize forms of tenses for the success in that exam only. Because teachers of English do not even teach English tenses in comparison to the Arabic ones; students are left on their own, without enough practice, making their way via thinking in Arabic while writing English. Lack of exposure to language could be another cause to commit errors in tenses. Most of the evidence suggests that the ability to do utilize productively systems of inflectional morphology, however, is often assumed to require an amount of linguistic experience and exposure to language without which it would be difficult for systematic ties needed for regular rule to be extracted. Sufficient exposure to non-rule-governed irregular forms is also required in order for appropriate blocking to occur [10].

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Table 6

Errors in Tenses, Aspects, and Voice Used by the Learners

Errors	Sentence Type				
	Affirmative				Negative
Shift	Tense-Shift	Past-to-present	12	10.34	
		Present-to-past	104	89.66	
		Total	**116**	**100**	
	Aspect-Shift	Simple-to-perfective	0	0	
		Simple-to-progressive	5	45.45	
		Perfective-to-simple	5	45.45	
		past perfective to present perfective	1	9.10	
		Total	**11**	**100**	
	Voice-shift	Active-to-passive	7	24.14	
		Passive-to-active	22	75.86	
		Total	**29**	**100**	
Verb-form	Concord	Adding –S	27	18.12	
		Deleting –S	92	61.74	
		Be	7	4.70	
	Complex VP		23	15.44	6
	Total		**149**	**100**	
Missing Auxiliary	Be		39	100	1
	Have		0	0	
	Do		0	0	
	Total		**39**	**100**	
Verb Omission	Verb		5	41.66	1
	Be		7	58.34	1
	Total		**12**	**100**	
Total of Totals			**356**		

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the present paper, certain conclusions have been found.

Despite the long time Iraqi EFL learners are learning English, those learners show no mastery over the use of tenses even at advanced learning levels. They often tend to commit errors in using tenses and verb-forms, and ultimately in expressing temporal relationships of events, states, or actions. This validates the first hypothesis of the study that Iraqi EFL learners tend to commit errors in verb-forms and use of tenses.

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Advanced EFL learners' writings show no evidence of mastery over the different tenses, aspects and moods in their written clauses and sentences. Past tense, in these writings, has proved to be the least erroneous and most used among other tenses. Students are mostly unable to use tenses correlated with aspects and modals in some larger forms of complex verb phrases. Thus, students tend to shift to simpler tenses, such as simple past, and do not use past perfective or present perfective progressive tenses at all. They seldom use past progressive, present progressive, and very rarely perfective progressive tenses. While using these tenses, students tend to shift to simpler constructions of VPs. This might be because of the syllabus those students follow in learning EFL for almost *forty* years.

The structural approach that concentrates on memorizing tenses and verb-forms in a form of rote-learning might do the learners a great deal of harm.

Paradoxically, the teachers who are graduates of the institutions adopting this curriculum as the only one all over Iraq are now the EFL teachers countrywide. So, teachers who have not mastered tenses are teaching tenses at the various levels of EFL learning and teaching. Those teachers often use Arabic as a means for teaching EFL and this will give rise to the serious problem that the learners are thinking in Arabic while using English; this, in turn, leads to a negative interlingual effect. On their behalf, students are not exposed enough to English language in order to develop their rote-learning into a systematic form of mastery over English tenses. Consequently, they keep using past forms only showing a lower level of controlling verb-forms and uses of the English VP.

These reasons validate the second hypothesis that students' errors could be due to several causes related, but not basically, to L1 interference.

4.2. Recommendations

In the light of these conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Although the NECI had been replaced by a new curriculum designed to teaching EFL in Iraq, generations of the English teachers who have been the output the NECI are in serious need to develop their potentials in teaching tenses through adopting modern methodology. The situation there requires amendment of the existing deteriorated English and the work for better acquisition of the language.
2. Because Iraqi EFL learners suffer from lower levels of learning the language, new approaches should be followed concentrating on the learners being the centre of the entire process of Language learning and teaching in genuine or genuine-like situations.

Full of exposure to language, whether spoken or written, is necessary for students to develop their own communicative competence.

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Endnotes

[I] The researcher uses block capital here to indicate that the element is in its abstract form that could be realized by any concrete form in accordance with the grammatical circumstance.

[II] In Iraq, the educational system is supervised and controlled by both the Ministry of Education and Ministry Higher Education &Scientific Research.

[III] Since 2005/2006, a new syllabus has been designed to teaching EFL in the new Iraq called 'Iraq Opportunities'.

[IV] Hours per week vary according to the type of academic study: literary or scientific in the preparatory schools respectively.

[V] The other examples will be limited to the VP only and sentences will not be written in full, for brevity.

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