



# مجلة بحوث

## جامعة حلب في المناطق المحررة

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جامعة حلب في المناطق المحررة





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- أن تكون المجلة مرجعاً علمياً للباحثين في مختلف العلوم.

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- ٨- ترسل البحوث المقدمة لمحكمين متخصصين، ممن يشهد لهم بالنزاهة والكفاءة العلمية في تقييم الأبحاث، ويتم هذا بطريقة سرية، ويعرض البحث على محكم ثالث في حال رفضه أحد المحكمين.
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- ١٠- يبلغ الباحث بقبول النشر أو الاعتذار عنه، ولا يعاد البحث إلى صاحبه إذا لم يقبل، ولا تقدم أسباب رفضه إلى الباحث.
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## أخطاء زمن الفعل في الكتابات الامتحانية لدى طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية السوريين

إعداد

أ. غياث الشيخ إبراهيم د. عبد الحميد معيكل

### ملخص البحث:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل أخطاء زمن الفعل في مقالات كتبها طلاب السنة الأولى السوريون في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية في جامعة حلب الحرة، في مناطق شمال سورية. من أجل ذلك، جمع الباحث بياناتٍ نوعيّةٍ من ٤٩ مقالةً، كُتبت تحت ظروف امتحانية، ومن مقابلة أجريت مع ١٠ طلاب يدرسون اللغة الإنكليزية في السنة الأولى. وتم تحويل البيانات النوعيّة إلى بيانات كميّة للحصول على نسب دقيقة لأخطاء زمن الفعل. وقد استخدم الطلاب ١٣٢٨ تركيباً فعلياً، ٧٥١ منها (٥٧%) كانت خاطئة. ومن بين التراكيب الخاطئة كان هناك ٢٠١ من الأخطاء في زمن الفعل (نسبة ٢٧% من مجموع الأخطاء). وقد أظهر تحليل المقابلة مع الطلاب أنّ نقص التعرض للغة الإنكليزية وطرق التدريس المرتكزة على الامتحان في المدارس شكّلا الخلفيّة لتلك الأخطاء. اعتماداً على النتائج التي تم التوصل لها، قدّمت الدراسة بعض التوصيات لكلّ من طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية ومدرسيها إضافةً إلى اقتراحات للأبحاث القادمة.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** أخطاء زمن الفعل، طرق التدريس، نقص التعرّض للغة الإنكليزية، طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية السوريون.



## Verb Tense Errors in Syrian EFL Students' Exam Scripts

Prepared by:

Mr. Ghiyath Al-Sheikh Ibrahim      Dr. Abdul Hamid Ma 'ikal

### Abstract:

This study aims at analyzing verb tense errors in essays written by Syrian first-year English students at Free Aleppo University, northern regions of Syria. To achieve this aim, the researcher collected qualitative data from 49 essays written under exam conditions and from an interview carried out with 10 first-year English students. The qualitative data was quantified to get correct percentages of the verb-tense errors. The students used 1328 verb structures in total, 751 (57%) incorrect, of which 201, or 27%, were verb-tense errors. The analysis of the interview indicated that lack of exposure to English and the exam-based teaching methods at school constituted the background of those errors. Based on the findings of the study, the study provided some implications for EFL teachers and students, and it offered suggestions for further research.

**Keywords:** verb tense errors, teaching methods, lack of exposure to English, Syrian EFL students.

## Suriyeli İngilizce öğrencilerinin sınav yazılarındaki fiil zaman hataları

Hazırlayanlar:

Mr. Ghiyath El-Şeyh İbrahim      Dr. Abdul Hamid Ma'ikal

### Özet:

Bu çalışma, Suriye'nin kuzeyindeki Halep Hür Üniversitesi İngilizce Bölümü birinci sınıf, Suriyeli öğrencilerin yazdığı makalelerdeki fiillerin zaman kipleriyle ilgili hataları incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunun için araştırmacı iki araştırma yöntemi kullanmıştır. Araştırmacı sınav koşullarında yazılmış 49 makaleden ve İngilizce eğitimi alan birinci sınıf 10 öğrenci ile yaptığı görüşmeden veri toplamıştır. Öğrenciler 1328 fiil kullanmışlar bunların 751 tanesini hatalı kullanmışlardır (%57). Bu hatalar arasında 201 tanesi zaman kipi ile alakalı olmaktadır. (toplam hataların %27'i).

Öğrencilerle yapılan yüzyüze görüşmelerde bu hataların kaynağı: İngilizce'yi pratikte kullanmama ve okullarda sınava dayalı öğretim sistemiyle eğitim görmeleridir.

Elde edilen sonuçlar neticesinde, İngilizce öğrenci ve öğretmenlerine bazı tavsiyelerde bulunmanın yanı sıra gelecekteki araştırmalar için de önerilerde bulunmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** fiil zaman hataları, öğretim yöntemleri, İngilizceye maruz kalma eksikliği, Suriyeli EFL öğrencileri.



## 1. Introduction

Tense is one of the most vital grammatical categories in English as it plays a fundamental role in the sentence meaning. Tense works with other categories such as aspect and time reference and is always expressed by a verb form that grammatically distinguishes English tenses from each other. For example, present, past and future times are expressed by verb forms, such as do/does, did, will do, respectively.

In English writings, the verb is the most significant part in the sentence. Palmer (1968) suggests, “Learning a language is to a very large degree learning how to operate the verbal forms of that language.” (p. 5). As for tenses, learners need to know how to form a specific tense, what its meaning is, and how to use it properly in different situations. Learners should specify the time of an action to understand whether it happens in the past, present, or in the future and learn how to produce correct verb forms that are compatible with the verb tense. For instance, EFL Arab learners usually “overuse the simple present tense. They find it hard to perceive and use a combination of the progressive and the perfective aspects to come up with the present perfect progressive tense” (Zhiri, 2014, p. 291). Al-Shahrani (2018) also found that Arab EFL students sometimes fail to use the past simple forms. Alesawe (2015) clarified that Arab EFL learners usually avoid using the present perfect and present perfect progressive, and use present simple instead. Therefore, it is essential to have a good knowledge about English verb tenses so that Syrian first-year English students at Free Aleppo University might produce good pieces of writing.

In many meetings held in the department of English at Free Aleppo University, teachers confirm that verb errors stand as a big barrier against Syrian first-year English students’ achievements, especially in grammar and writing subjects. In addition, the researcher has noticed that the majority of Syrian first-year English majors commit a large number of grammatical errors, and that tense error is one of the most serious types of these errors. Therefore, the researcher thinks that analyzing tense errors might help Syrian first-year English students find solutions to these errors and, consequently, overcome one of the most important problems in their academic journey (Al-Sheikh Ibrahim, 2023).

## 2. Literature review

Producing correct verb structures is one of the most important skills that EFL learners need in their academic writings. In the process of writing, EFL learners usually encounter a series of challenges, beginning from organizing their ideas in the form of an academic essay and ending in putting these ideas in effective grammatical structures.

### 2.1 Error analysis

According to Brown (2000), an error is a “noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker and it reflects the learner's competence in the target language.” (p. 226). The processes of analyzing those errors are called error analysis (EA). Nzama (2010, p.11) states that error analysis is useful in second language learning because it reveals to the teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers of what the problem areas are. Al-Khresheh (2016, p. 51) cites from Ellis (1994, p. 49) that learners’ errors are influenced by a group of important factors that are significant in “collecting a well-defined sample of learner language so that clear statements can be made regarding what kinds of errors the learners produce and under what conditions”. For example, the learners’ written samples in the current study will take the form of an essay written under exam conditions.

### 2.2 Sources of error

This section investigates the sources of error, namely interlingual and intralingual factors.

#### 2.2.1 Interlingual errors

The term ‘interlanguage’ is defined as the linguistic system that learners produce in the process of learning another language (Al-Shahrani, 2018, p. 122). Selinker (1972) described the word ‘interlanguage’ as the set of structural rules constructed by second language learners during their attempts to learn the target language; it refers to the systematic knowledge of an L2 that is independent of both learner’s L1 and the target language. Adjemian (1976) modifies Selinker's view of interlanguage by stressing that the learner’s knowledge of L2 has a unique character. This means that the learners may use rules from L1, or they may violate or overgeneralize a rule from the target language when they produce a meaning. During the language learning process, they try to follow learning strategies such as language





transfer, overgeneralization and simplification (Alghamdi, 2019, p. 19). Language transfer refers to both positive and negative transfer of some linguistic items from a learner's mother tongue into target language.

### 2.2.1.1. Positive transfer

Positive transfer occurs when a learner's mother tongue interference does not lead to errors in the target language. According to Oldin (1989), positive transfer may make the language-learning process easier for the learners; it may happen when the L1 and L2 have some forms in common. For example, both Arabic and English use the preposition 'in' before the names of cities, so an Arabic learner is expected to say *'I live in Idlib'*. However, Wahba, Taha, & England (2014) claim that Arab learners cannot count on positive transfer, as Arabic and English do not have many similar forms.

### 2.2.1.2 Negative transfer (L1 interference)

Cortes (2006) defines negative transfer as "the negative influence that the knowledge of the first language has in the learning of the target language due to the differences existing between both languages" (p. 4). Ellis (1994) emphasizes that this kind of transfer obstructs the procurement process. For example, an Arab learner may produce the incorrect question *'What you want'* instead of the correct one *'what do you want'* because Arabic does not use a helping verb in its interrogative structure. Dulay et al. (1982) assert that "L2 errors are often the result of learners relying on carrying out word for word translations of native language surface structures while producing spoken or written utterances in their performance of target language" (p.163).

### 2.2.2 Intralingual errors

The intralingual interference is another factor for the occurrence of FL learners' errors (Richard, 2015, p.6). He explains that interlingual errors do not reflect the structure of the learners' mother tongue, but overgeneralization resulting from incomplete or lack of exposure to the target language. Therefore, these errors are dependent of L1; they are called intralingual errors as they occur due to the difficulty of learning the target language itself (Jiang, 2009). Corder (1967) proposes that some of the "strategies adopted by the learner of a second language are substantially the same as those by which a first language is acquired" (p. 161). Corder's view is also supported Dulay et al. (1982, as cited in Alzahrani, 2020, p. 177), that intralingual errors reflect the mechanisms followed by learner's during the development of second

language learning, which are often similar in nature to the strategies used by children when learning their first language. (Lim, 2010, p. 24) agrees with both Corder and Dulay that intralingual errors reflect the learner's competence at a certain stage of his second language learning, and that they are evidence of some characteristics of first language acquisition. However, Lim adds that intralingual errors are not interlingual in their nature because they do not occur as an effect of the differences between L1 and L2.

### 2.3 Tense and aspect

Tense and aspect take up a major area in language teaching, yet many EFL learners fail to master tense and aspect even though they spend long time in order to use them (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, as cited in Rahman & Ali, 2015).

#### 2.3.1 Tense

Comrie (1976) defines tense as the grammatical structure that locates the time of a situation relative to the situation of the utterance (p. 9). Cowan (2008) agrees with Comrie that tense "expresses the time that an action occurs in relation to the moment of speaking" (p. 350). The primary use of the present tense, for example, 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" (Huddleston, 1988, p. 69).

The distinction between 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. For Lyons (1977), futurity is not a purely temporal concept; it necessarily includes some elements of prediction or some modal notions. Past tense, however, has this temporal sense of concept from the viewpoint of the language users' experience and conceptualization. Hence, differences between past, present, and future tenses are inherently correlated with differences in aspect.

#### 2.3.2 Aspect

Klein (1994, & 1995, as cited in O'Brien, 2003, p. 63) points out that English has three aspects. First, simple aspect describes situations presented in their entirety. For example, the single event of 'goes' and 'went' in '*Ahmed goes to school every day*' and '*Ahmed went to school yesterday*' are viewed in their entirety and at one level if the relationship between the events and reference points 'every day' and 'yesterday' is considered. However,



aspectual features at the syntactic level in ‘goes’ include the notion of habituality, changing the overall aspectual perspective and making it imperfective while ‘went’ is perfective. Second, progressive aspect focuses on phrases of an event that may be located in different time frames as in ‘*Ahmed is talking with his friends right now*’ and ‘*Ahmed was talking with his friends when the phone rang*’. The reference points ‘*now*’ and ‘*when the phone rang*’ are included in the event time. Third, perfect aspect describes an event viewed as either having occurred or at least having begun before the reference time, as in ‘*Ahmed has visited Jordan four times*’ or ‘*Ahmed has lived/ been living in Damascus for three years*’.

The current study hopes to contribute to the literature of Error Analysis research by answering the following research questions:

1. What types of tense errors do Syrian first-year English students commit in their exam writings?
2. Why do Syrian first-year English students commit tense errors?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

This study aims at analyzing tense errors in essays written by Syrian first-year English students studying in the Department of English at Free Aleppo University, northern regions of Syria. For this aim, the researcher followed the qualitative approach to answer two research questions relating to the types and the reasons of tense errors.

#### 3.2. Participants

First-year English majors are supposed to be 19 years old, though some of them might be older because they might have left university and joined it later. These male and female students join the Department of English at Free Aleppo University after they have passed the final exams of the twelfth grade in Syria without strict admission requirements, that is, all the applicants having a desire to learn English are admitted. They study for four years before they get a Bachelor’s Degree in English Language and Literature.

The total number of the first-year English students is around 110 but only 65 students attended the exam of *Writing 2*, where the researcher got the writing samples. However, 49 out of 65 students, which the researcher thinks is a

good representative sample (75% of the students), participated in this study by writing essays under real exam conditions. The researcher got 49 copies of the male and female students' essays to be used in the analysis process and interviewed 10 of those students.

### 3.3 Research instruments

The current study collected qualitative data from two research instruments: Essay and interview. Creswell and Poth (2016) explain that the aim of qualitative research is not only to study few individuals but also to collect extensive details about each individual. Qualitative research is not meant to generalize information but to display what is specific or particular about one phenomenon. Creswell (2012, cited in Jomaa & Bidin, 2017, p. 184) suggests that participants in qualitative studies should be identified purposefully in order to assist in exploring the phenomenon comprehensively. Moreover, Dörnyei (2007) argues that interviewing 6-10 participants are quite enough. This study lends itself to two sources of data in order to identify the tense errors in the Syrian first-year English students' scripts and find out the reasons behind those errors:

#### 3.3.1 Essays written by first-year English students

These essays are written samples used for analyzing tense errors committed by first-year English students at Free Aleppo University. As the researcher has a specific aim, which is analyzing samples of the students' writings, he analyzed 49 purposefully selected essays written under real exam conditions. According to the study plan of the Department of English, the students take the exam of *Writing 2* at the end of the second semester. The researcher adopted the students' writing production of *Writing 2* because he wanted to analyze a longer piece of writing (essay), which was not available in *Writing 1*. In the part allocated to the essay-writing question in the exam paper, the examiner (teacher of *Writing 2*) asked the students to write an essay about one of the following topics (The content of these topics was beyond the control of the researcher):

1. How people have changed after ten years of war
2. Trade is better than employment

The majority of students' essays followed the rules of the essay form (Introduction, body, conclusion). In contrast, about only half of the essays



contained around 300 words, while some of them did not exceed 200 words, possibly because the first-year English students were still new to essay writing.

### 3.3.2 Interview

A semi-structured interview was carried out with 10 Syrian first-year English students at Free Aleppo University to collect data about how they learned grammar and writing at both school and university, which would help identify the reasons of verb tense errors in their writings (Second research question). Cohen et al. (2007) define interviews as a flexible tool for gathering data, which could allow multi-sensory methods to be employed such as verbal, written, spoken and heard.

In order to get more information on the issues regarding the students' knowledge of English tenses, this interview consisted of two groups of open-ended questions (semi-structured interview). The first group of questions asked the students about how they were taught verb tenses and writing at school, while the second group asked them about how they were taught those two language skills at university.

### 3.4 Data collection procedures

The researcher took the consent of the dean of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities at Free Aleppo University to have access to the Examination Department of the faculty, where he purposefully selected 49 essays as a requirement of *Writing 2*.

After the students' essays were collected, the researcher organized a chart, designed in a table form, to collect data about the tense errors. In fact, all the tense errors were categorized as misinformation errors, a category of Dulay et al.'s (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST) that classifies the errors into omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering errors.

This analysis chart first contained three rows to get totals of the verb structures used, the correct verb structures, and the incorrect ones. The chart also contained space to collect data about the wrong use of tense errors, which were encoded as (Pr. S) for Present simple, (Pr. C) for present continuous, (Pr. P) for present perfect, etc. Every category in the analysis chart has a blank space where the number of occurrence of certain type of tense error was to be written, which made the process of manual data collection easier.

After stapling the chart mentioned above to every essay paper, the researcher started the stage of analyzing the students' tense errors.

In addition, about 30 students showed an interest to participate in the interview, so the researcher made it clear that he would purposefully select only 10, which they welcomed. They were informed that their information would be confidential and that the interview would be recorded.

The researcher started his open-ended (semi-structured) interview questions after he made every effort to be friendly and ensure that the students were relaxed so that they could express what they wished to say. The researcher felt that the students' English level would not enable them to understand the questions if spoken in English, so he used Arabic (the students' mother tongue), and a recording device was used to record the students' answers in order to be transcribed later. This interview enabled us to answer the second research question (reasons of verb tense errors) by gaining directly more details from the first-year English students about how they were taught verb tenses at both school and university.

### 3.5 Data analysis procedures

This section explains the procedures of the data analysis process.

#### 3.5.1 Analysis of verb tense errors

In order to answer the first research question, the researcher analyzed the tense errors by identifying and describing the types of verb tense errors in the students' academic writings.

Before the researcher analyzed the students' essays, he read them twice, took notes, listed the types of tense errors that appeared in the students' essays, and categorized these types into the analysis chart described in 3.4 above. Here are examples taken from the students' essays showing the methodology followed in identifying the types of verb tense errors:

- (1) *In ten years of war people witness everything.*
- (2) *They aren't believing in the right way*
- (3) *After the war has appeared, everything in my life changed*

In sentence (1) above, the student used the simple present (witness) instead of the present perfect (have witnessed), which led to a tense error, specifically a wrong use of present simple. The student should have written '*through ten*



*years of war, people have witnessed a lot of things*'. In (2), the student used the present continuous instead of the present simple. Almost the student wanted to say, *'they do not think well'*. In (3), the student used the present perfect instead of the past simple. He should have said, *'after the war started, everything in my life changed'*.

After compiling the data and saving it on his computer, the researcher quantified it by running it through an Excel spreadsheet to calculate the number of each type of tense error and organize the data into tables. He also used the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to display that data in figures.

### 3.5.2 Data analysis of the students' interview

A semi-structured interview was carried out with 10 Syrian first-year English students at Free Aleppo University to collect data about how they learned English tenses at both school and university, which would help answer the second research question (For further details about the questions of the interview, see Appendix B).

In order to avoid any inaccuracies or loss of data, the researcher recorded the students' interviews and followed the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). Anderson (2007) points out that Thematic Content Analysis is "a descriptive presentation of qualitative data, which may take the form of interview transcripts collected from research participants or other identified texts that reflect experientially on the topic of study" (p. 1). However, TCA went through many stages in the current study. First, the researcher transcribed the students' answers and uploaded them to his computer as a Word File for the sake of offline reading.

Second, the researcher printed the transcriptions and read them more than one time in order to get familiar with the data and write notes. Third, he manually identified the common points in the students' answers, such as the effect of exam on English learning (labelled as 'Ex. Effect'), the use of MT in classroom (labelled as 'MT Use'), error correction strategies (Labelled as 'Corr. Str.'). etc. Fourth, the researcher returned to the Word File saved on the computer and highlighted the common points to distinguish them from other data.

Fifth, in a new Word File, he changed the labels mentioned above into categories; for example, the label 'MT Use' was divided into two categories,

'Yes for MT Use' and 'No for MT Use'. Sixth, the researcher started to compile data by cutting and pasting all the common points, which were closely connected in meaning, under their categories so they were all together. For example, a statement like "I did not have enough vocabulary to make me understand English" was compiled under the category of 'Yes for MT Use'. Next, the researcher organized the categories into themes, such 'The reasons of students' use of Arabic in classrooms', where he listed all the reasons behind the students' use of Arabic in classrooms.

The researcher then started the quantifying stage, where he included quotes from the interviewees, and gave percentages of the frequent themes to be used in the chapter of results.

#### 4. Results and discussion

This chapter displays the findings of this study and it provides a detailed description and discussion of the data.

##### 4.1. Types of tense errors in the students' exam scripts

Before analyzing the verb errors, the researcher obtained the number of all the verb structures used by the students, the number and percentage of correct verb structures, and the number and percentage of incorrect ones. Table 1 shows these totals in detail:

**Table 1**

##### *Totals of Correct and Incorrect Verb Structures*

Total of verb structures	Total of correct verb structures	Total of incorrect verb structures	Tense errors
1328	577	751	201
Percentage	43.44%	56.55%	27%

Table 1 above shows that the students used 1328 verb structures in their essays, 577 (43.44%) correct and 751 (56.55%) incorrect. Obviously, the students' incorrect verb structures were more than the correct ones. This indicates that first-year English students still have real problems in their language performance levels. The above results also show that the students committed 201 tense errors (27% of the total number of the incorrect verb structures). This indicates that the students misunderstand how verb tenses work within the sentence.



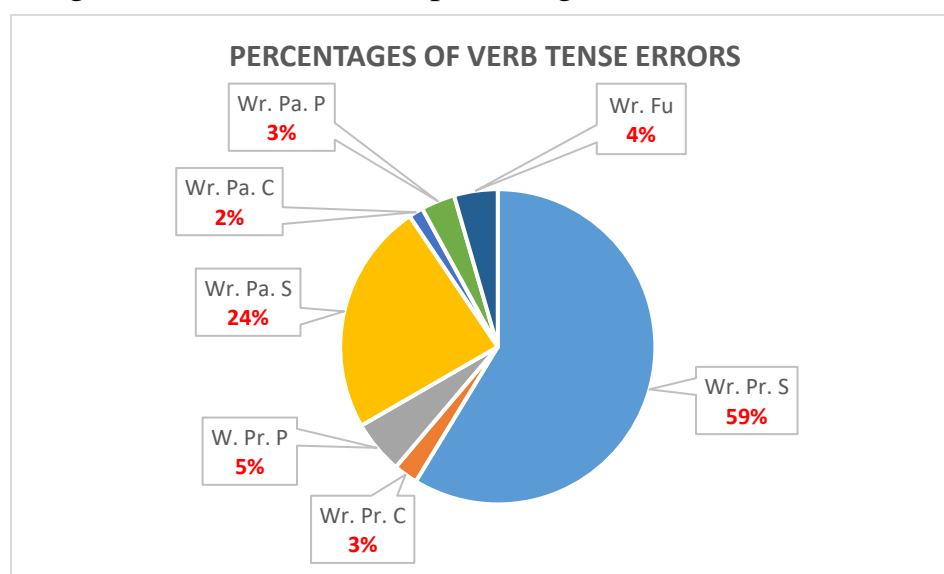
The students' verb-tense errors appeared in seven categories. Table 2 below shows the total number of occurrence of each verb tense errors:

**Table 2**

***Totals of Verbs Tense Errors***

Wr. Use of Pr. S	Wr. Use of Pr. C	Wr. Use of Pr. P	Wr. Use of Pa. S	Wr. Use of Pa. C	Wr. Use of Pa. P	Wr. Use of Future	Total
118	5	11	48	3	7	9	<b>201</b>

Table 2 above shows that the students committed 201 verb tense errors. Wrong use of present simple (Pr. S) constituted the major part as it occurred 118 times, while wrong use of past simple (Pa. S) occurred less as it occurred 48 times. The other types of verb tense errors were fewer: wrong use of present perfect (Pr. P) occurred 11 times, wrong use of future (Future) occurred 9 times, wrong use of past perfect (Pa. P) 7 times, wrong use of present continuous (Pr. C) 5 times, and wrong use of past continuous (Pa. C) 3 times. Figure 1 below shows the percentages of verb tense errors:



**Figure 1. Percentage of verb tense errors**

The students committed 201 verb tense errors (27% of the total number of the verb error), of which the wrong use of present simple was the highest frequent by 59% (118 out of 201 errors) followed by wrong use of past simple by 24% (48 errors). For example, many students produced verb tense errors like 'yesterday I watch a video', 'many Syrians lose some organs in the war', 'these years of war affected on the mental health' and 'through these years,

*the people became stronger and fearless*'. The researcher thinks that students have gaps in their information about using the verb tense correctly that they were not able to use 'watched' instead of 'watch', 'lost/have lost' instead of 'lose', 'have affected' instead of 'affected on' or 'have become' instead of 'became'.

However, the wrong uses of the other tenses were very few in the students' essays. For example, there were 11 (5%) wrong uses of the present perfect out of 201 tense errors, 9 (4%) wrong uses of future, 7 (3%) wrong uses of the past perfect, 5 (3%) wrong uses of the present continuous, and 3 (2%) wrong uses of the past continuous.

The researcher thinks that the high frequency of the wrong uses of both present simple and past simple tenses possibly means that the students avoided using the present perfect tense. For example, in the sentences above, the students avoided using 'have lost', 'have affected' and 'have become' and preferred to use a one-word verb, such as 'lose', 'affected' and 'became'. The researcher believes that Arab EFL learners find it difficult to use a word that does not have a meaning within a structure, such as the auxiliary 'have/has' in the grammatical structure of the present perfect, which might be the reason why some students replaced the present perfect with the present simple and past simple.

Another possible reason of the avoidance of using present perfect, or more specifically the replacement of present perfect with the present or past simple tenses, is the absence of positive transfer of Arabic that may make it more difficult for the students to use the present perfect. For example, Al-Khresheh (2006) argues that EFL learners depend mainly on interlingual strategy to facilitate their learning process. This means that when MT and TL have a structure in common, the learner finds it easier to use it correctly in the TL, and vice versa. In other words, Arabic does not have a tense similar to the present perfect in its syntactical system, which might make the students more confused while using this tense. Therefore, the students find it inevitable to resort to other tenses that can be found in the grammatical system of Arabic, such as the present simple or past simple, which in turn may make them produce verb tense errors.

To sum up, tense errors indicate that first-year English students at Free Aleppo University have not fully mastered the verb tenses yet.



#### 4.2 Why do Syrian first-year English students commit tense errors?

To answer this research question, the researcher utilized the qualitative data of the students' interview. The interview questions asked about how students learned grammar and writing at both school (Questions 1 – 6) and university (7 – 9).

Depending on the data obtained from the students' interview, the researcher believes that lack of exposure to English, which the students had in the long period of learning English at school, is the main factor that paved the way in front of all the types of tense errors mentioned above. This belief is supported by 90% of the students interviewed who assured that their teachers at school used Arabic by 70% to 90% in classroom and they were not given enough time to practice English neither in speaking nor in writing. 80% of those students also assured that the teaching strategies followed by teachers at school served only to meet the pressing needs of the final exams, not to develop their language skills, and that using Arabic helped them to prepare for the exam. Their schoolteachers stuck only to the exercises of the book without giving them any opportunity to take risk and practice language in real situations, which most of the students felt satisfied with, as that would not be a part of their exams. 80% of the students also assured that they did not have to practice any kind of writing and that they were asked to memorize only the topics of the book, as one of those topics would be the writing requirement of the exam.

Krashen (1983, cited in Kozhevnikova, 2019, p. 434) argues that teacher's contribution into his/her students' language acquisition can be creating an acquisition – rich learning environment in the classroom, creating so called “English atmosphere” and increasing students' motivation about learning the target language. Unfortunately, the information obtained from the interview above does not seem to be in line with Krashen's speech about the teacher's role in creating “English atmosphere” in the classroom. The students did not receive enough time of learning, which left them with poor knowledge about how to select the tense that best expresses the situation. This supports Cabrera and Zubizarreta (2005, cited in Matiini, 2016, p. 145) who emphasize that mistakes made by the learners “are motivated by their lack of knowledge”. Therefore, it was no wonder that the student's ignorance of rule restrictions pertaining the wrong use of present perfect with past time reference led him to produce *'the war has begun ten years ago'* instead of *'the war began ten*

*years ago*'. In addition, the student's false concepts about the correct use of present simple tense possibly led him to hypothesize that this tense could be used to talk about effects in the present time, thus using it in '*the people lose their jobs*', which definitely should be written as '*the people have lost their jobs*'.

The students' interview also enabled us to find that the learning environment of English at school is completely different from that in the Department of English at Free Aleppo University. In the Department of English, the teachers seem to follow Krashen's (1983) talk about the "rich learning environment" to a large extent, but the following question is still confusing to many specialists: Why do first-year English students still commit so many verb errors in their academic writings? To answer this question, the researcher thinks that lack of exposure which the students had at school played a negative role in the rise of these errors. This conclusion is supported by Abu-Jarad (2008) who stressed the role which language exposure plays in the students' control of the grammatical items as they move to upper levels.

Another possible factor that could constitute a background for the tense errors is what 90% of the interviewed students described as the focus on teaching grammar at the sentence level, not at paragraph or essay level. The importance of teaching grammar within context appears in Obaid's (2010) study about the grammar-teaching approaches (the inductive, the deductive and the contextualized approaches). Obaid (ibid) indicated that there were significant statistical differences in the students' achievement of English grammar due to the method of teaching in favor of the contextualized approach. This is also supported by 50% of those students who uncovered that putting the verb in the correct form required them only to look for clues available in the sentence, such as 'sometime', 'years ago', 'so far', etc. rather than understanding the meaning of the sentence.

Depending on the above data, the majority of the schoolteachers as well as most of the university teachers did not teach grammar in context or situations (contextualized grammar), which might have left the students with greater difficulties to use correct verb structures in their compositions. Weaver (1996) for instance argues that teaching grammar in isolation does seem to have much positive effect on the writing of more than few students. Hillocks and Smith (1991) also state that teaching grammar exercises does not necessarily lead to authentic writing; putting effort on sentence generating,



combining, and manipulating can be more fruitful for the writers than traditional grammar instruction. Alshayban (2012) concludes that “writing problems are not restricted to the sentence level” (P. 25). Thus, the schoolteachers and university teachers’ focus on teaching verbs at the level of single sentence only, that is, not teaching them within context, could play a negative role in the students’ ability to use these verb structures correctly in longer compositions.

The researcher also thinks that the absence of appropriate error-correction strategies, which 50% of the students clarified in the interview, might be another reason for the rise of tense errors. Spada (1997) argues that correcting the error is more effective than teaching the students about anticipated grammatical problems. She claims that learners who receive information and corrective feedback right after they commit errors show superior performance than those who “receive information before they are required to use the target forms” (p. 79). When the teacher does not know when and how to interfere to treat the error, the students possibly think of it as correct and, consequently, it fossilizes.

To sum up, the analysis indicates that the main reason behind the verb tense errors in the current study is lack of exposure and lack of practice, which could be a result of the uncontrolled use of Arabic language in classroom.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Summary of the findings

This study aimed at analyzing the tense errors found in the writings of first-year students majoring in English language and literature at Free Aleppo University, northern regions of Syria. The researcher raised two research questions relating to the types of tense errors and the reasons behind these errors.

This study followed the qualitative approach and implemented two research instruments to collect data about the topic in question. In other words, the researcher collected data from 49 essays written by first-year English students and a semi-structured interview for 10 first-year English students. The results showed that the students committed 201 tense errors (27%) in 751 incorrect verb structures. The high frequency of the wrong use of present simple indicates that the students avoided the use of the tenses whose forms require auxiliaries, such as the present perfect.

The analysis of the students' interview indicated that the learning process at school was exam-based, where schoolteachers use Arabic as the main means of instruction in their classrooms, thus depriving their students of a real chance to practice English. These factors created a serious lack of exposure to English at the school learning stage. More specifically, the amount of exposure to English, which the students had at school for at least 8 years right before they joined the Department of English, was not enough to make them produce correct verb tenses in their academic writings in the first year of English Department. Thus, lack of exposure, lack of practice, and the uncontrolled use of Arabic by both teachers and students at school shaped the background of tense errors in the current.

## 5.2 Implications of the study

The findings of this study present some significant implications for EFL teachers and students.

1. EFL schoolteachers use Arabic as the main medium of instruction in class. This means that the students would not be able to practice English adequately. Using Arabic in this high rate would give the impression to the students that Arabic is inevitable in the learning process of English, and this implies that there would be high opportunity of L1 interference in their compositions. Schoolteachers should teach English through English so that the students would be in real touch with English and would be better able to see how verb forms are structured and how verb tenses work within a longer piece of speech or writing.
2. EFL schoolteachers do not often correct their students' writing and grammatical errors. This means that students are likely to show a lot of error-fossilization and poor writing competence and performance levels. Therefore, teachers should follow appropriate error-correction strategies so that they know when and how to interfere to correct the students' errors.
3. The high percentage of the wrong use of simple present indicates that the students avoid the use of the present perfect, though the topic they chose to write about requires a high use of the present perfect. University teachers should provide their students with adequate theoretical information about the use of the present perfect supported by extra tasks to enable the students practice the use of this tense in the text.



4. In order to practice English, students should write as many paragraphs as possible and show them to their teachers to correct the errors and get feedback, as this would enable them to see where they commit errors and to tap into the recommendations of their teachers.

### **5.3 Recommendations for further research**

In light of the current study, the researcher suggests two research points to be investigated by future research:

1. The effects of the examination system on the learning process of English language in North Syria.
2. The impact of the uncontrolled use of Arabic in class on Syrian EFL learners.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix A: a sample of the students' essays

أوراق الإجابة :

People Changed After War

Syria was a good country to live in before ten years. It has an acceptable work, education conditions when people demanded to improve their life circumstances, the regime start fight them. Since ten years till now, the people agonized from formidable affects such as: psychological and material conditions.

First, This years of war affected badly on the mental health of people who suffered from the Criminal regime, air strikes and torture. So, that causes a lot of disease such as: Fear ~~from being~~, dipressions, and worry that may lead to life ends. As a result ~~by~~ ~~the~~ conducted by the Center of Studies, there are 7% of mental health patients ends their life by ~~themselves~~ their walking.

Second, Also there are alot of changing on the material side, So the people forced to leave their homes to save the lifes of their families. Most of them suffer from poverty and lack of work chances. All of ~~this~~ this changing led to spread of early marriage, Child labor. ~~the most~~ where the most of people in my country forced the children to work in case of helping their families.

At the end Syrian people suffered alot during this Ten years, and their life style ~~has~~ has changed in bad way. I hope that the Assad regime ruin soon, and the peace spread, and the life condition improve for

- 8 -

جامعة حلب في المناطق المحررة

الصفحة 2 من 9

### Appendix B: the students' interview

Interview questions for the first-year English students at Free Aleppo University



**This interview consists of two groups of questions: Group 1 asks about how you were taught verb tenses at school; Group 2 asks about how you are taught verb tenses at university.**

**Group 1:**

1. How did your teacher teach you English at school, as a subject to study for the exam or as a subject to help you learn the language as a means of communication?
2. Which language did your schoolteachers use more in classroom, Arabic or English? How often?
3. What kind of verb exercise did you use to do, for example, putting the correct form of the verb at the level of a single sentence, or a paragraph?
4. What strategy did you follow in choosing the correct form of the verb, for example, did you depend on clues available in the sentence, such as always, so far, yesterday, etc., or on the context of the sentence?
5. Did he use to correct your errors and how?
6. In writing classes, were you asked to write about topics other than those required in the book? If no, why?

**Group 2**

7. What is the medium of instruction in your grammar and writing classes, Arabic or English?
8. Do your grammar and writing teachers help you to correct your errors or not? If yes, how does he do that, for example, does he explain the rule or give you the correct answer without further explanation?
9. Do you think that the current teaching method followed by your grammar teacher will help you use the verb in its correct form in a longer piece of writing? If yes, how? If no, why?

