

Investigating the Role of Epistemic Models in Iraqi EFL Learners' Inaccurate Use of the English Present Tense Forms

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Abstract

To investigate the source of difficulty faced by Iraqi EFL learners in using English present tense forms and uncover what makes their errors frequent and similar, this paper addressed the potential epistemic models which may underlie tense forms and impose specific meanings on them. It also tackled a couple of questions relevant to the relation between time and tense and whether the latter is a time signal per se. To answer these queries, a set of EFL learners' responses to tense related questions was collected from their academic test sheets and analyzed qualitatively. The analysis showed that disparity between the English and Arabic epistemic models leads the natives of each language to construe the tense related sceneries differently. The English present tense, for example, locates an event on a timeline which consists of temporal areas at different distance from the moment of speaking. This tense also shows its reality status depending on physical or virtual accessibility of that event at time of speaking. This contrasts with the Arabic concept of present tense which attributes the evolutionary phase of an event (rather than the event itself) to some agent causer¹ and the status of that phase is prototypically valued as unfulfilled reality regardless of time reference. Consequently, the learners' tendency to impose their native epistemic models on the English tense causes frequent errors whose similarity is stimulated by those models which represent the learners' shared epistemic knowledge in their cultural community and thus they do not fit the English tense system.

Key words: Epistemic models, Time, Tense, meaning, EFL learners, Present tense forms

¹*An agent causer is the doer of an action or the performer of an activity. An agent corresponds to the logical subject of a verb.

تقصي دور النماذج المعرفية في الاستعمال غير الدقيق لصيغ المضارع الإبخليزية من قبل الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الإبخليزية لغة أجنبية

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المستخلص

لتحري سبب الصعوبة التي يواجهها الطلبة العراقيين من متعلمي اللغة الإبخليزية لغة أجنبية في استخدام صيغ المضارع باللغة الإبخليزية والكشف عما يجعل أخطاءهم متكررة ومتشابهة ، تناولت البحث النماذج المعرفية المحتملة التي قد تكمن وراء أشكال الزمن الصرفي وتسبغ عليها معاني محددة. وتناول سؤالين ذوا صلة بالعلاقة بين الزمان والزمن الصرفي وما إذا كان الأخير يمثل دلالة زمنية في حد ذاته. وللإجابة عن هذه التساؤلات جمعت عينة من إجابات الطلبة متعلمي اللغة الإبخليزية على الأسئلة المتعلقة بالزمن الصرفي من أوراق الاختبار الأكاديمية خاصتهم وتحليلها نوعياً. وأظهر التحليل أن التباين بين النموذجين المعرفيين الإبخليزي والعربي يقود متحدثي كل لغة إلى تفسير المشاهد ذات الصلة بالزمن الصرفي بشكل مختلف. فصيغة المضارع باللغة الإبخليزية، على سبيل المثال ، تحدد موقع الحدث على خط زمني يتكون من نطاقات زمنية تقع على مسافات مختلفة من لحظة التكلم وبالاكتفاء على إمكانية الولوج المادي أو الافتراضي لحدث ما في لحظة التكلم تصنف حالة واقعة. وهذا يناقض مفهوم الزمن المضارع في العربية الذي يسند طور الحدوث والتجدد للحدث (وليس الحدث بكتلته) إلى عامل الفعل وأن واقعية الحدث تعد غير متحققة بغض النظر عن دلالة الوقت. ومن ثم فإن ميول الطلبة إلى فرض النماذج المعرفية خاصتهم على بنية الزمن الصرفي في الإبخليزية ينتج عنه أخطاء متكررة يعزى تشابهها إلى تلك النماذج التي تمثل المخزون المعرفي المشترك للطلبة في مجتمعهم الثقافي والذي لا يتوافق مع اللغة الإبخليزية.

الكلمات الدالة: النماذج المعرفية، الزمان، الزمن الصرفي، المعنى، متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية، لغة أجنبية، صيغ زمن المضارع

1. Introduction

The cognitive grammar theory states that grammar has meaning just like lexicon. An element in a language grammatical system is actually a conceptualization of some situation in its speakers' interactional world [1] and this meaningful abstraction is a memory bank of the natives' cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions. An EFL learner naturally needs to master the conventional concepts of every structural assembly and symbol entrenched by the natives of the target language in order to be able to communicate accurately in that language. It is well known that acquisition of a target language tends to be easier when the target linguistic knowledge has a direct equivalent in the learners' native language while matters turn to be more complicated when the gap between the learners' language and the target language is wide. What hardens the task more and more is the unawareness of what impedes the acquisition of some details of the target language in spite of the heavy weight they occupy within the teaching material in

the EFL classes; a contrast whose best portrait is touched in the case of the English tense system.

Tenses are one of the most emphasized topics in the syllabus of the English language in various Iraqi teaching stages and for various levels of proficiency. In spite of tenses' constant recurrence in textbooks, the learners frequently fail to get good marks in their test sheets and tenses are still a kind of spiny and confusing topic for them. It seems that the deficiency in this part of language system is a global phenomenon. Cowan (2008) assumed that tenses are difficult challenging area in a language system that EFL learners cannot master [2]. Choosing the appropriate tense form that fit the intended message is problematic for some learners especially when their native does not have the tense forms that directly match those of the target language in terms of one to one form correspondence [3]

Actually, differences in tense forms across languages symbolize a sort of divergence on the level of epistemic knowledge models underlying them in different languages and raising awareness of those patterning bases is essential for seizing the best way of offering the tense- related topics to learners and allowing them to grasp Language conceptual level; which can be effective in getting the maximum value of these topics in their textbooks. Accordingly, the present paper intends to survey the epistemic models latent in the English tense system and analyze the Iraqi EFL learners' tense errors by foregrounding their native's potential models that are expected to incline those learners towards certain construal whose instantiation, as decided by the learners' choices, does not fit the target language.

2. Literature Review

Langacker (1987) proposed that grammatical categories, relations, and rules are reflections of their counterparts in natives' interactional world. He stated that humans have ability to construe conceptual content from their perceptual experiences and put that content in assemblies of structures with meaningful value [1]. Meaning is thus identified with conceptualization where the construal of a grammatical structure, like all other structures in various levels of Language system, involves various patterns of representing some perceptual content.

A specific aspect of a conceptual construal can involve an encoding of a specific detail of an experience where only a part of it (immediate scope) is attended to for some purpose. That part is termed 'profile' and it indicates the conceptual referent particularly focused on from the whole perceptual scene. On contrast, the schematic aspect of the conceptual construal encompasses an encoding of an elaborated detail of an experience where the whole scenery (maximal scope) of the experience activated in communication is encoded [4]. Clearly, specificity and schematicity of an encoded experience are determined by focusing which involves selecting details from the conceptual content of an experience and arranging them into a foreground and a background details. The foreground is the most central detail which is, mentally speaking, more accessible and salient in comparison to other details in the background.

The arrangement of foreground and background components of a conceptual content is a reflection of the particular path of composing concepts from the perceptual scene [4]. Accordingly, grammar is meaningful and each grammatical entity is a symbolic form related to some particular meaning (i.e. conceptual referent) in the experiential world and as a result the grammatical system of a language cannot be investigated in separable of conceptual meaning [5].

The construal operations involved in conceptualizing our thoughts about the world are universal and the formed symbolic assemblies (i.e. linguistic structures) are conventionalized and turned to be a habitual verbal behavior in natives' communication when they adequately recurred in individuals' interaction [6]. The adequate recurrence of grammatical patterns is actually related to their effectiveness in responding to and fitting the individuals' interactional needs across places and times of their experiences; which can hint at the role of culture in imposing meanings on these patterns and on the manner of abstracting the relevant concepts and the ways of relating them in line with peculiarities of speakers of a language as members of cultural groups.

This fact seems to be one of the key reasons of difficulty of the English tense system on the part of EFL learners in general and the Iraqi ones in particular. Iraqi EFL learners are often unaware of the form –meaning relations underlying the semantics of tenses. They do not understand the cognitive models which motivate their usages. As a result they may, for example, invoke some irrelevant conceptual framework for the relation between an event designated by a verb and the time of its happening; which will definitely be reflected in the inaccurate uses of the various tenses of the target language. Actually, tenses have schematic meanings whose content values represent the most detailed components of the encoded experiences and this complicates the learners' problem and make it necessary for them to understand what makes the target tense system distinct from that of their native language. The present paper is intended to be helpful in this aspect through analyzing the Iraqi EFL learners' problems in using English present tenses in light of the cognitive models which serve as the base on which tenses in English and Arabic build their meanings.

3. Research Questions

This paper tries to answer one main question:

1. Why do Iraqi EFL learners frequently fail to use the English present tense forms accurately?
2. Does a tense solely form a time signal in English and Arabic?
3. What kinds of epistemic models do govern the relation between tense and time in English and Arabic?
4. How are Arabic epistemic models reflected in the Iraqi EFL learners' use of the English present tense forms?

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive method of analysis where the data are actually a sample of Iraqi EFL learners' responses to a grammar test conducted through their academic courses. The data were collected from responses of undergraduate students who are major in English. The researcher first discusses the concepts of tense and time in English and the way the cognitive models underlying these concepts affect the English present tenses and their meanings. Then, tense and time in the Arabic cognition is investigated to highlight how their relevant cognitive models differ from the English ones. The record of divergence across the two languages in terms of cognitive epistemic models is utilized as a tool for analyzing some samples of the Iraqi EFL learners' inaccurate responses to some tense items in their test sheets; which is expected to be fruitful in raising awareness of teachers of English and prompt them to present tenses to learners in a manner that makes them conscious of the distinct epistemic knowledge that governs each language.

5. Analysis of the English Present Tense Forms

5.1. Tense and Time in English

Tense as a time reference device is only a simplified notion because language includes a lot of examples where neither the present refers to the time of speaking nor the past refers to past time. Moreover, time can be absent in some expressions. The heterogeneous behaviour of tenses reflects that it is not time related per se. There are some epistemic models which characterize tenses and their meanings [7]. The epistemic models are abstract representations of the world and of individuals' positions within it. The two kinds of models which seem to be essential in discussing meanings of tense in English are: basic epistemic model and time line model) [8]. [9] These models invoke conceptions concerning the reality status of states of affairs and times of their occurrences as conceptualized by the speaker at the moment of speaking.

Reality for the English speakers indicates all states of affairs that they approve as currently obtaining or being obtained in the past [9]. The former is termed 'immediate reality' and speakers have access to some of its portions while the latter is labelled 'non-immediate reality' and the speakers accept it as being established in the past yet they do not have direct access to its portions. English speakers take immediate reality as a 'vantage point' from which they perceive and conceptualize various details. Everything unknown to humans (out of their scope of knowledge) is valued as unknown reality. The latter is elaborated into reality that individuals suspect its establishment (i.e. "irreality") and reality of which individuals are completely ignorant ("non-reality") [9: p551].

Reality does not evolve in a vacuum but along an axis termed time. Time –line model is thus the other epistemic model which underlies meanings of the English tenses. The speech event (i.e. the event, its participants, and immediate circumstances) [10] is located on the time axis from the vantage point of immediate reality and from this point it

is segmented into past, present and future. In this construal, present corresponds to time of speaking [11].

Accordingly, the semantics of the English present pertains to the epistemic distance where the present tense form prototypically refers to a process occurs at the time of speaking while its schematic meanings involve epistemic immediacy. Tense is thus can be defined as the status of an event or a state in light of speakers' conceptualization of immediate reality and the tense morpheme, which is a "distance" component, is an indicator of that status [12: p162]. It also specifies the "existential status" of a process designated by the verb element in the English sentence [12: p 228]. Actually it specifies a relation between a profiled state or event and the ground represented by "speech event, its participants, and immediate circumstances" [13]. The conceptual scenery according to which reality, time, and their interrelation are represented is not a direct reflection of the real physical scenery but a projection of how speakers view it; which justifies the divergent uses within the one language, the differences across languages, and consequently the potential challenges faced by learners of foreign languages in this topic.

5.2. Schematic Meanings of Some forms of English Present Tense

5.2.1. Simple present: English natives as conceptualizers construe various conceptual meanings of the present tense by profiling different components of an event from different vantage points. One construal of an event can involve profiling the immediate reality as a whole from a longer distance position and with less level of acuity; which gives rise to the following meanings:

A. Permanency

Immediate reality indicates the attaining of an event before our eyes and that we have access to this reality. As a sort of experience that reality turns to be an anchored part of the structural knowledge stored in our cognition. Profiling the attainment of an event as a whole episode provokes the concepts of stability and permanency in analogy to the logic that what is stuck down in our minds should have these characteristics. Consequently, present tense is used to express stable states of affairs and unchangeable situations or ones whose truth values are stable for a relatively long periods:

1-I speak two languages

2 –Iraq lies in Asia.

3- They live in Tokyo.

B-Habits

Immediate reality involves on goingness of an event at time of speaking [14]. Ongoingness naturally involves a series of iterations that are repeated over and over towards some particular target point or a final state. Profiling the habitual iterations as expected moves within the scenery of the ongoing reality extends the meaning of the present tense morpheme to express habitual, timeless, and generic events which are expected and predictable states of affairs:

4-He plays football professionally.

5- The sun rises in the east.

6-Nurses take care of patients.

It has been indicated earlier that grounding of a clause refers to locating an event on timeline and establishing its reality status [15] by the native speaker; which means that grounding is not limited to the speech event (i.e. event, its participants, and immediate circumstances) but involves natives' conceptualization of their epistemic knowledge of the world [16]. The world is made up of some events whose occurrence is possible and predictable as normal course of events while others are possible in certain circumstances. The former are stored in individuals' cognition as 'structural knowledge' of the world while the latter are only 'phenomenal structures' which arise in particular circumstances and turn to be part of the structural knowledge of the world across time [9]. Accordingly, in (4) playing professionally is construed as a phenomenal structure which encodes how the world is construed within the particular scope of predication (whenever he plays he does so professionally). While the direction of sun's rise is not bounded to some particular time in (5) and it is true all times, the generic meaning in (6) involves that the profiled property is ascribed to every nurse. Taking care of patients is not happening at the moment of speaking but is profiled as a virtual instance of that event called up at the time of speaking to express a generalization about that facet of the structure of the world[17].

These structural and phenomenal cognitive models foregrounds in imperfective verb forms which reject the-ing participle morpheme. Events we know, understand, think, like or dislike turns to be part of our structural knowledge of the relevant reality and their actualization is stabilized as normal course of events.

7- I know your name.

8-She dislikes coffee.

The same idea underlies the occurrence of verbs of senses in simple present [1]:

9- It tastes bitter.

10- They hear his voice clearly now.

The conceptual content of these verbs involves profiling the whole episodes as structure components of the world and consequently they are homogenous entities with no internal change and their relevant realities are unbounded to immediate reality [1]

5.2.2. Present Progressive

The symbolic components of the progressive tense involves some forms of the verb 'to be' followed by the root content verb which is attached to the -ing suffix. The verb 'to be' functions as an existential component which reinforces the concept of the happening of an event [12] whose internal layers are brought into focus by the -ing element. Adopting an internal vantage point enables speakers of profiling various fine segments of the internal layers of the immediate reality and construing its various potential scenarios from a close distance by scanning the specifications of component

states of that reality successively. Profiling the internal layer of a process prompts the following meanings:

A. Ongoingness

The most prominent component in the internal area of a process designated by the verb element is the ongoingness [18] which profiles the evolution of a series of transitions of the bounded process and backgrounds its initial and final boundaries:

11- I am delivering a lecture now.

B. Temporariness

A verb is categorized as a bounded process with a starting and an end points on timeline [18]. That process ends by getting to the end boundary on that line. Profiling the event as a bounded entity with an endpoint gives rise to temporary concept as in:

12- I am living with a host family these days.

C. Incompleteness

Ongoingness encompasses shifting from one point on the timeline to another; heading towards some particular termination. Each point is an incomplete event's component which through its movement to another position on timeline contributes to the final scenery of the event as a whole [19]. Profiling the 'imperfection' detail of the individual component states of the event rises the incompleteness concept of the present progressive in expressions like:

13- My mum is making the main dish and I am waiting for her to complete it.

The ongoingness of an event implied in the progressive form in this sentence indicates that 'making the dish' is incomplete and this concept is reinforced through the conceptual meaning of the second clause which involves the waiting for its completion.

D. Interruption

Across the series of transitions from one point component to another within the internal scenario of a process, the initiation of a new point boundary interrupts the continuity of the one point preceding it by making its end a new beginning to the one that follows, so it cuts from the boundaries of the preceding point. Profiling these intersected points across the timeline provokes interruption sense:

14- "Am I disturbing you?" No, I'm just doing the ironing. [20: p141]

E. Description

Some occurrences of present continuous form do not foreground the concept of process or an action:

15- She is wearing a red classic dress with high heels.

English speakers seem to profile the area between the boundaries of the process (i.e. between the starting and the ending points) designated by the verb to zoom in that area to create a closer conception of the relevant event. By doing so they profile the attaining process as a whole reality regardless its time limits. [21]

F. Preparation for Future Event

The internal perspective highlighted by the -ing morpheme can impose a future time reference in some occurrences of the present continuous. It is well-known that the

futurate meaning of the progressive form describes plans, intentions and decisions, or programmed events and arrangements. Those concepts belong to a sort of preparation conditions related to the subject of the verb rather than the "ongoingness" concept [22]. However, the latter invokes the former in sentences like:

16- They are getting married this summer.

Where within the scenery of ongoing process, each a transition is actually a preparatory step towards the next transition which is a posterior position in comparison to the preparatory transition. Profiling the preparatory detail of a transition contributes to the use of progressive form to refer to future while preparation signals that the event is cognitively in progress.

G. Temporary Habit

Though habits involving the knowledge of routine iteration which is encoded by the simple present, profiling that iteration and including the intention component instead of the expectation component (see 5.2.1. B) prompts the temporary habit concept as in(15):

17- " I am taking Finnish lessons this month." [23: p 423].

This occurrence of progressive indicates that the state of affair is cognitively in progress and is valid as a habit across the time limits of 'this month'. Cognitive or virtual progress is the key for the acceptability of the use of the English stative verbs in the continuous form as in (16):

18- She is owning the land tomorrow.

Where the event is intensified through describing it as a sort of virtual immediate reality not in terms of its physical occurrence at the speaking time, but in terms of its being a valid reality in the speakers cognition.

5.2.3 Perfect Present

English speakers divide the temporal distance from the moment of speaking to the past into three spheres encoded by present perfect, past, and past perfect. The present perfect represents the closest time sphere to the present moment and its symbolic structure encompasses the existential verb 'have' which relates the situation to the present moment, and an anterior event encoded by the past participle form of the verb which designates a temporal situation. The participle form signals that the English speakers approach the situation at issue through summary scanning focusing on its state components in an accumulated body (i.e. as a whole). The present perfect then implies that the speaker looks backwards at an anterior event or an anterior phase of an event; profiling the temporal path from the known reality of the past to the known immediate reality of the present time [24]. The getting to the present detail stimulates the concept of 'current relevance' [25] whose specification or exact conceptual content (i.e. meaning) is a matter of inference:

19- I have repaired my watch after a couple of attempts.

The moment of speaking is the central deictic area from which the speaker evaluates a situation. In case of present perfect this moment is the termination point to

which the anterior event reaches. Hence profiling the building up phases preceding that point gives rise to the accomplishment concept as in (17). However, profiling the termination point itself rather than the culminating phases provokes the 'achievement' concept as in (18):

20. They have won the match. I am so proud of them.

Note that the conceptual meaning of the main verb and the conceptual contents of the elements of a sentence and the context all contribute to the evaluation of the perfect resultant states as accomplishments or achievements. Both concepts are punctual but the latter highlights the culminating details leading to the result at issue while the former focuses on the result itself [24].

Taking an internal perspective of the temporal path of the anterior event is symbolized by using the existential verbs 'have' and 'been' with the progressive verb form (see 5.2.2). That path is continuous to the present moment and its progressiveness involves a series of repeated transitions heading towards some termination point. Profiling continuous and repeated transitions imposes the concept of repetition in (19) as opposed to (20):

21-They have been trying to get an approval for their project.

22-They have tried to get an approval for their project.

Where (19) explains the iteration concept while (20) implies the one time attempt concept. The human epistemic knowledge that repetition of a task consumes time seem to be a key factor in the English natives' use of progressive perfect to encode long duration of an event in contrast to the simple perfect which encodes timeless situations or situations whose intrinsic structure does not accept the repetition concept:

23. She has been in France. (A state of being somewhere)

24. The computer has broken. (Stop working involves one phase of happening rather than repeated phases to be judged as a true state of affair)

The existential verb 'have' indicates that the state of affair begins at the time its relevant anterior event ends and that state continues to the moment of speaking. Moreover, that state does not end but leads up to the present time [26]. Hence, the present perfect encodes indefinite time as neither the starting point of a state of affair nor its ending is known; which can explain why inference is active with perfect form.

6. Investigating the Effect of the Arabic Cognitive Epistemic Models in Iraqi EFL Learners' Use of the English present tense

6.1. Time and Tense in Arabic

The epistemic models which underlie the Arabic tense system differ from those of English. Arabs construe predication differently as they profile epistemic fulfillment element of an event rather than its epistemic temporal distance from the ground. Arabs view that a verb is a metonymic expression whose conceptual referent is not an event (as

a final outcome of certain preparatory activities). Rather, a conceptual referent of a verb is an activity of some causer agent. In other words, an Arabic verb designates some phases of an event evidentiality by encoding the relevant activities of causer agents which represent various levels of an event as an evidential happening. The achievement phase of an event serves as the reference point at which an activity is distributed into past, present, and future. Accordingly, the Arabic epistemic definition of the past tense indicates the fulfilled reality, while the present is the evolution phase of that reality and it involves dynamicity between past and future because the moment witnesses the starting point of an event turns to be part of the past once the relevant portion of that event (which was a future event before its initiation) is created [10] [27]. An Arabic verb, conceptually speaking, can symbolize any of an event's phases (i.e. causer agents' activities) which can encode the status of non-being (future), the status of emerging to be (present) and the status of that which has been achieved (past). In light of this conceptualization, future is an earlier state of the event which precedes its initiation. It is prior to the past as it has not yet witnessed the BEING state of the event and the past is real and more confident than the present event whose component building phase develops and changes constantly towards the final existence of the event (as a fulfilled evidential reality) [28][29]. In brief, the past events is an evidential reality, the present event is an evolutionary reality, while future is an unfulfilled reality according to Arabs' epistemic model.

English natives ground events by establishing the location of events on the time path and the moment of speaking is the central deictic point in light of which reality is judged as immediate and non-immediate where immediacy is a direct evidence of known reality. Arabs, however, ground events by focusing on status of fulfilment of an event and based on this status an activity is evaluated as a fulfilled or an unfulfilled reality where the fulfillment detail is the central point in evaluating the evidential state of the relevant event. Time reference in the two languages are consequently quite different. English time reference locates an event on the timeline based on its relation to the moment of speaking. An Arabic reference point, however, locates an activity existential status by virtue of its relation to some other activity; categorizing an event as a series of earlier and later activities building up the whole event. In other words, the Arabic past, present, and future are actually three phases (Being phase, evolution phase, and not being phase) of one reality represented by the already existential entity represented by the event, and every phase of that event is a discrete entity which is scanned in summary and time reference is contextually inferred rather than being canned in the verb tense form [30]. While the English past, present and future are different types of realities (i.e. immediate known reality, non-immediate known reality, and unknown reality) that are scanned sequentially across the temporal path on which an event component is located.

In brief, different epistemic models are elaborated differently across Arabic and English. Consequently, the corresponding tense systems diverge and so do the schematic meanings derived from the prototypical meanings of the relevant tense morphemes in the two languages.

6.2. Tracing the Arabic Cognitive Epistemic Models in Iraqi EFL Learners' Use of the English present tense

The Arabic present tense form of a verb is derived from the name of the event at issue (الحدث) through prefixing the root of relevant verb by one of the following four morphemes (أ-ن-ي-ت) whose function is to attribute that an activity to its causer agent represented by the speaker or the speakers, a third person or a group of persons (whose linguistic referent is the logical subject of the sentence) [31]. For example, the conceptual content of an event like (قراءة: reading) involves that this event is a homogenous entity while the present tense morphological forms related to it show the status of various phases of that event across its path of being and each form symbolizes an activity and its causer agent:

- أقرأ (I read)
- نقرأ (we read)
- يقرأ (he reads\ they read)
- تقرأ (she reads\ they read)

The present tense form in each of these morphological variations of the one verb has the following conceptual components which contribute to its whole conceptual content as a unit:

- a. The event of reading (حدث القراءة). [32]
- b. Causer agents who bring that event into existence (i.e. causers or creators of that event) [33]. The agent can be the speaker or speakers or a third person or persons (animate or inanimate entity) spoken about [34]; which are parallel to the English subject pronouns (I, we, he, she, they).
- c. Attribution of the activity (i.e. a phase of the event) at issue to the relevant agent among the ones mentioned in (b) [34].
- d. Unspecific time reference: either now or future [35].
- e. Evolution, continuity and repetition as intrinsic conceptual components of the content verb in its present morphological form 'يفعل'. [36].

Accordingly, the Arabic tense system differs from the English one in that it grounds the event not to the time of its occurrence but to the causer agent of the relevant activity. Consequently, it does not indicate the status of reality in terms of immediacy and non-immediacy but in terms of its being a fulfilled achievement or a not yet- achieved event [37]. Lack of correspondence between the epistemic models that patterns the tense systems of the English and the Arabic languages can impede the Iraqi EFL learners' ability to master the English tense system.

Examining the learners' use of the present tense forms records a high level of similarity in the types of errors committed by the learners. A fact which hints at the

potential unified vision or a general preference adopted by learners concerning the concepts of event, time, reality and any other relevant details. This validates the notion that these errors are not accidental but are stimulated systematically by the cultural epistemic knowledge of those learners. One of the learners' most frequent errors involves missing the third person singular –s in the English simple present form of the verb²:

25. Mummy **sit** near baby to help small baby.

26. It **sound** good but no time is there to do it.

27. The water **boil** when heating more time.

The English epistemic model of immediate reality, which corresponds to the moment of speaking, involves the speaker(s), the addressee(s) as the default participants in the encoded event while a third person or the equivalents represented by he, she, and it are actually out of the default scenery.

Hence, the English tense system employs the third singular-s to indicate that there are some further participants other than the default ones included in the encoded scenery[38]. However, the main function of the Arabic tense morphemes is attributing an activity to some agent rather than locating an event on some temporal path. Thus, the Arabic present tense has a morphological form to every kind of potential subjects (i.e. causer agents of activities at issue). The Arab natives shared the knowledge that a verb in a particular morphological form implies the conceptual referent of the causer agent (i.e. logical subject) of the relevant activity and nobody else; the boundedness in this aspect makes the function of the English singular –s seem unnecessary to the learners' perceptions and they frequently drop it.

Another kind of error encompasses the dropping of the existential auxiliary (i.e. is, are, am) or the –ing morpheme from the progressive form of the English present tense:

28. They ending discussion because they become nervous.

29. We are read the topic in front of teacher.

The English existential auxiliary serves as a reinforcement of the being status of the process encoded by the English verb while the –ing morphemes profiles an aspect of the internal layer of that process. The learners' elimination of one of these constituents of the present progressive structure belongs to the absence of their relevant conceptual content in the Arabic morphological form (يفعل :yefalu) of the present tense. This tense in all its variations (inflected varieties of a verb that go with a range of potential subjects) indicates the creation and the progression of an activity toward the fulfilment point of an event; which entails that this tense, unlike its English counterpart, does not encode an event as a validated accessible reality but as an evolutionary status of reality which is still in the phase of development towards the Being status. Moreover, conceptualizing the English verb as an ongoing process and the tense as a grounding element that locates the positions of the various state components of that process on timeline does not fit the

² These examples are students' sentences without modification so some expressions may seem weird.

Arabs' perception of the verb as a linguistic symbol of some causal agents' activities which show the various being phases of an event. This difference leaves the learners far from taking into account the English concept of internal layer or close distance detail of a process encoded by -ing morpheme as they basically do not scan the event at issue sequentially but encode it in a summary fashion as a fulfilled or unfulfilled event.

The summary scanning of a scenery can also be the reason behind Iraqi EFL learners' use of the English stative and imperfective verbs in the progressive form:

30. Although we are knowing the truth not tell teacher because.....

31. I told the professor I am not understanding his explain...

The English epistemic justification of limiting these verbs to the simple present form is that the reality status of each is not restricted to temporal boundaries so the event at issue is viewed from a great temporal distant scope as an overall state of affair (scanned as a whole entity). What is a special aspect of construing a scenery in case of the English imperfective is actually the normal course of construing a scene in Arabic. The temporal component is naturally weak in the Arabic tense and it implies the absolute concept of time while its specifications and boundaries can be imposed by the contextual details or indices employed in the sentence rather than the tense morpheme. Accordingly, Arabic present tense form does not differentiate between the stative, imperfective and motion verbs and all verbs are capable of being prefixed with any of the tense morphemes i.e. temporal limits are out of concern as the activity is attributed to individuals rather than to time zones in Arabic. The learners seem to generalize this knowledge on the English verb ;failing to realize the difference between the two languages in this aspect.

Another observed error is represented by the learners' use of either the simple past or the present progressive instead of the present perfect:

32. I am exhausted. I worked all day.

It has been mentioned earlier that English present perfect encodes the conceptual meanings of achievement depending on which portion of a scenery is profiled (see 5.2.3. Perfect Present). The achievement concept of the English present perfect seem to be comparable to the Arabic conceptual concept of the past tense of a verb where the latter symbolizes an event that has reached its termination point of being and turned to be an existential entity; which explains the learners' tendency towards the use of the past tense instead of the present perfect following their cultural epistemic model which focuses on the event evidentiality rather than time –related details.

The current relevance property inherent in the English present perfect makes some EFL learners think that the present continuous forms are the optimum option in expressions where the present perfect is actually the accurate option. This error can be related to the cognitive physiology of the Arabic present tense. A verb in this tense is viewed as a succession of already generated state components and the currently evolved ones; which goes on progression with an aim of getting these states into the holistic frame of an event as a fulfilled reality. This scenery can be confused with the one encoded by

the English present perfect where the past event leads up to rather than ends in the present time. Progression details in the two sceneries may bring the Arabic concept of continuity (as opposed to stopping) of an event on stage; which is mirrored in the learners' tendency towards the English present progressive rather than the perfect forms when they produce expressions like:

33. We are running for 3 hours.

Time is not the central component of the Arabic tense system in general and its specification arises essentially through contextual factors and indices. The key purpose of the Arabic tenses is to show the status of an event in terms of BEING or EVOLVING and attribute that status to some agent causer. Under the influence of such a model of knowledge learners prefer to focus on the action itself rather than the duration that it demands to be completed or to cause an effect. Consequently, they disregard the temporal dimension when they use the simple instead of the continuous perfect forms even when the length of time is the focus of the expression:

34. We have tried to get job many times from long time but government always refusing files.

The concepts of evolution, repetition, continuance are inherent in the Arabic morphological form of the present tense regardless of time reference as they are related to the qualitative nature (natural texture) of the particular event's evolutionary phase symbolized by this form. Accordingly, concepts like incompleteness, temporariness, permanency and stability which can be potentials of the evolutionary phase are not solely contingent on the tense morpheme but are brought into stage by employing some lexical items in the text where the present tense form is used.

According to all that mentioned earlier, it becomes obvious that Iraqi EFL learners' errors are not merely some instances of incomplete application of rules of the target language and that they have their roots in the epistemic models and the identity they impose on the tense system and its relevant details.

7. Conclusion

An epistemic approach to some details of the present tense in English and Arabic mirrors that Iraqi EFL learners' Errors in using this tense form reflect a shift in construal as the facets of a situation which profiled by the English natives differ from those attended to by Iraqi EFL learners in their native tense system. The schematic meanings of the Arabic morphemes indicates the subjectivity of the event to its source (causal) agent from an objective vantage point in contrast to the English schematic meanings which point to the objective details of a scenery from a subjective vantage point represented by the speaker. This point answers the main query concerning Iraqi EL learners' inaccurate use of English present forms.

An English verb designates a process that consists of a series of component states which are scanned sequentially and the tense of the verb expresses the reality status of each component state in the particular portion of time dimension. The speaker is the emic

perspective from which the construal is formed (i.e. the speaker and the hearer are the default participants in the event). However, the Arabic verb indicates an existential being labelled an event. The tense form of a verb is a symbol not of an event but of some existential phases of that event. An Arabic tense indicates each phase as a punctual entity (being phase, evolution phase, not being phase) and attribute each phase to some causer agent. This difference causes the learners to focus on what the event is rather than when it occurs.

Part of the learners' inability to master the English present tense comes from the fact that its conceptual meaning is not canned in some particular rule or pattern. Actually, the analysis shows that the English natives have divergent construal as they adopt various vantage points where the temporal distance from which a speaker (i.e. conceptualizer) can profile either more or less elaborated details and consequently expresses different status of reality in light of the epistemic models cognitively arisen in terms of the invoked aspect. This notion together with the one mentioned in the paragraph earlier emphasize that a tense is not a time signal per se; which responds to the second question of this paper.

Another challenge for the learners lies in the difference between their mother tongue and the target language in terms of tense as a grounding element and investigating this challenge results in answering the paper's third question concerning the epistemic models that govern the tense system in English and Arabic. The English tense relates the profiled detail of an event to the time of its occurrence and the temporal distance between this time and time of conceptualization represented by the moment of speaking is a central component in patterning the schematic meanings of the English tenses. This is quite different from the Arabic tense which relates the profiled phase of an event to some causer agents and time is only a potential unbounded component of the event's phases. This prompts the Iraqi EFL learners, as a sample of the Arabic natives, to miss the time boundaries which are effective in invoking various English tense relevant meanings.

As for the paper's last question concerning the influence of Iraqi epistemic models on Iraqi EFL learners' use of the English present tense forms, the analysis shows that these models affect the conceptual referents involved in the construal at issue and hence determine the learners' linguistic options of English tenses. An Arabic present form of a verb, for example, symbolizes the evolution concept as an inherent meaning of this form regardless of the time reference it is employed to denote while meanings like incompleteness, temporariness, permanency, etc. are encoded linguistically by employing content words that directly encode the intended concept. Such a linguistic routine is an entrenched behaviour which guides Iraqi EFL learners' attention towards focusing on the verb elements in the English sentences as a content word regardless of the schematic meaning imposed on it by the tense morphemes.

The concept of continuity in Arabic present tense means without stopping which is an unbounded concept (independent of time). This concept is inherent in the Arabic present form and is related to the processual transitions involved in the evolutionary

phase as a prototypical meaning of the present tense form. Under the influence of the entrenchment of the symbolic relation between the present form and that concept of transitions' continuity, Iraqi EFL learners unconsciously miss the fact that the English concept of continuity is time dependence and focus on the content material of the verb as a lexical item without taking into consideration the nature of the English verb element which involves both the lexical content and the schematic meaning imposed by the tense morphemes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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Appendix (1): Sample of Iraqi EFL learners' Use of the English Present Tense Forms

- I didn't eat lunch today.
- I am not eat this food.
- She is come soon.
- I don't eat lunch today.
- I am go to the school by the bus.
- The math teacher is give us too much tasks.
- He is needing a dictionary to know this word.
- Some bird are fly to warmer country in winter.
- What are you think of her book?
- The coach selected players often.
- I'm very tired because I am cutting the grass all morning.
- I didn't fit yet.
- He won many tournaments since 1990.
- She working hard because she has exams next week.
- The children watched 5 videos all morning.
- They building a new airport soon.
- They are exhausted. They are exercising kids all day.
- Every day my daddy drink much water.
- I'm playing football for 2 years.
- That man try to do something.