

# The English past tense oral performance of Saudi EFL learners

Saudi Journal of  
Language Studies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study aims to examine how Saudi EFL adult learners produce English past tense and explore the types of morphological errors that they make. It is hoped that the study findings and conclusions can help to promote the L2 past tense learning of Saudi EFL learners by reporting some insights and implications for Saudi EFL classrooms.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study collected natural oral data from Saudi EFL adult students and used quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze data. The participants' oral past tense production was transcribed and coded according to some morphological tense features: regular and irregular verb forms, adverbials, connectives and past markers.

**Findings** – Findings show that Saudi EFL students appropriated the use of English past tense. This appropriateness can be observed in the different ranges of regulars and irregulars, adverbials, connectives, tense markers, use of past modal verbs and progressive forms and relating the past tense events to the chronological order of their occurrences. Although students produced an adequate rate of regular verb sentences, they did not pay more attention to the accuracy of regular verbs and they produced a low rate of irregular verbs and tense markers.

**Originality/value** – The study contributes an original work to the body of L2 and EFL research by reporting the language performance and experience of Saudi EFL learners when they use English to narrate their past tense stories. The study's findings and conclusions are essential for L2 and EFL research because they can help to understand the investigated phenomenon (the use and errors of English past tense) and bridge the research gap in the tense-aspect morphology of L2 research. The body of L2 tense-aspect morphology research still needs more research on Arab and Saudi EFL contexts.

**Keywords** Arabic tense-aspect, English tense-aspect, Past tense morphology, Regular verbs, Irregular verbs, Saudi EFL students

**Paper type** Research paper

Received 21 December 2024

Revised 16 March 2025

Accepted 27 March 2025

## Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has greatly enhanced our understanding of how learners of a second language (L2) acquire it and develop its morphological features. A key area within SLA is interlanguage (IL), which was introduced to clarify the sequential stages L2 learners experience and to identify potential grammatical errors that may arise during their learning journey. According to [Richard-Amato \(2003\)](#), the IL process is explained as follows:

This process reflects the systematic development of the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of the second language and is very similar to the process followed by first language learners. Throughout, hypothesis testing occurs usually at the subconscious level and predictable errors are made along the way, regardless of what first language the students speak (p. 37) (as cited in [Mourssi, 2013a](#), p. 398).

Regarding the acquisition of the English tense aspect, [Bardovi-Harlig \(2000\)](#) finds that learners are less proficient at identifying the meaning of a tense aspect than they are at acquiring the contrasts among various tenses and grammatical aspects simultaneously.

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Special thanks and gratitude go to the participants in this research, the reviewers, and the editor of Saudi journal of language studies for their insights and constructive comments.



Saudi Journal of Language Studies

Vol. 5 No. 3, 2025

pp. 155-173

Emerald Publishing Limited

e-ISSN: 2634-2448

p-ISSN: 2634-243X

DOI 10.1108/SJLS-12-2024-0071

The present study is inspired by Bardovi-Harlig's (1999) conclusion, which suggests that the "increase in scholarly activity in this domain of second language acquisition[tense-aspect], as reflected not only in the number of studies undertaken but in the number of target languages investigated, bodes well for the understanding of temporality in second language" (p. 341). Saudi EFL learners specifically struggle with grammar issues and particularly with the misuse of English tenses. While much of the existing SLA literature attributes English grammar and tense misuse challenges to the distinctions between the Arabic and English grammatical systems (e.g. Abdalla, 2014; Mourssi, 2012, 2013a), there is a need for more research that directly explores how Saudi EFL learners produce the morphological forms of English tenses. There is a lack of investigation into how Saudi EFL learners execute and acquire their English past tense.

### Background

#### *The acquisition of English past tense morphology in L2 context*

The acquisition of tense morphology has been investigated extensively by L2 researchers (e.g. Salaberry, 2024; Andersen and Shirai, 1994; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2020, 2022; Mourssi, 2012, 2013a, b; Mueller, 2018; Robison, 1990; Salaberry, 2024; Salaberry, 1999, 2000). According to Mueller (2018), the incorporation of tense- and aspect-related morphology in languages exhibits asymmetry, often first emerging with certain classes of lexical aspect before extending to others. Consequently, the specific classes and developmental phases of tense- and aspect-related morphology, as well as how second language learners acquire English morphology, remain understudied.

Bardovi-Harlig (1999) outlined various developmental stages that L2 learners experience when using the past tense. In the initial stage (*pragmatic*), learners can indicate "temporality" by narrating events in chronological order. The second stage (*lexical*) sees them using adverbials (such as *yesterday*, *after that*, and *then*) and connectives (including *so*, *and*, *because*, and *but*) to refer to the past tense. In the third stage (*morphological*), learners begin to apply verbal morphology after mastering the earlier stages. Bardovi-Harlig (1999) found that the regular past forms appeared before the irregular ones among both children and adults. In contrast, Lee (1997) noted that Korean EFL learners frequently used irregular verbs over regular ones in their oral speech. Additionally, it has been suggested that the use of irregular verbs results in a greater frequency of tense markers than regular verbs (Wolfram, 1989).

Research indicates that the English simple past tense typically develops before the past progressive (Bailey, 2013; Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). On the other hand, the acquisition of the English progressive typically occurs prior to mastering both regular and irregular past tense forms (Mueller, 2018). For instance, Mueller (2018) observed that L2 learners generally achieve a higher accuracy rate with past tense than with the progressive form. Bardovi-Harlig (2000) noted that new morphemes can emerge in the interlanguage system when there is a connection between their form and meaning. She suggested that if learners consistently use the simple past correctly 60–70% of the time in speaking, they might be on the path to acquiring "a second morphological past" (p. 148). Regarding past tense references, Lightbown and Spada (1999) pointed out that when L2 learners tell past events, they usually do so in chronological order and according to when and where the events initially occurred.

#### *The morphology of tense in the Arabic language system*

The Arabic language is categorized as a derivational variety. It exhibits inflectional morphology in verb forms, similar to English, which utilizes affixes to convey grammatical features such as person, number, gender, and mood (Btoosh, 2019; Kahoul, 2014; Shamsan and Attayib, 2015). Arabic mainly has three verb forms: *ālmaḍī* (past, *perfective*), *ālmuḍāri'u* (present, *imperfective*), and *ālāāmru* (*imperative*), as shown in Table 1. Both perfective and imperfective forms can inflect to indicate verbal tense and aspect. The imperfective form

**Table 1.** The structure of Arabic three main verb forms

Arabic Verb forms	Romanized Arabic verbs	Gender/ Number	English Verb forms	Inflectional features	Affixing features
الْمَاضِي كَتَبَ كَتَبْتَ كَتَبُوا	alṡmāḡī Kataba katabat katabūa	male female plural	<i>Past Perfective</i> Wrote	person, number, and gender	Prefixal
الْمُضَارِع يَكْتُبُ تَكْتُبُ يَكْتُبُونَ	alṡmūdāriʕ yaktuba taktubu yaktubūna	male female plural	<i>Present Imperfective</i> Write	person, number, gender, and mood	Prefixal and Suffixal
الْأَمْرُ اُكْتُبْ! اُكْتُبِي! اُكْتُبُوا!	alʔamru auktub! auktubī! auktubūa!	male female plural	<i>Imperative</i> Write!	number, and gender	Suffixal

**Source(s):** Author's synthesis of Arabic and English verbs

features prefixes (for person) and suffixes (for number), while the perfective form only has prefixes. Although the imperative form includes suffixes for number and gender, it does not convey tense or aspect in Arabic (c.f., [Btoosh, 2019](#)).

[Kahoul \(2014\)](#) contends that “Arabic has both syntactic features for past tense and verbal agreement and phonological structures similar to those required to accommodate the English inflection at the syllable level” (p. 85). Additionally, he states that “Arabic verbs are distinguished by past and present tenses and correspond with their subjects in person, number, and gender” (p. 95). Nonetheless, some researchers have noted that Arabic contains three morphologically defined tenses: *past*, *present*, and *future* ([Hinkel, 2004](#)).

#### *Tense and aspect in the Arabic language system*

Tense can be defined as “the grammaticalisation of location in time” ([Comrie, 1985](#), p. 1). [Shamsan and Attayib \(2015\)](#) noted that “[t]ense refers to the point of time in which the action occurs present, past or future, but aspect denotes whether the action has completed or not” (p. 146). That is, the complete action shows that the aspect is *perfective*, whereas the incomplete action indicates either the aspect is *imperfective* or *progressive*. [Shamsan and Attayib \(2015\)](#) indicated that “tense is realized morphologically but aspect is realized syntactically” (p.146).

[Shamsan and Attayib \(2015\)](#) explored the similarities and differences between Arabic and English. Their findings reveal that both languages feature inflectional forms in three parts of speech: verbs, nouns, and adjectives. In Arabic, these inflections can take the form of both suffixes and prefixes, while in English, only suffixes are used. They noted several key points about Arabic and English verbs: (1) both languages possess inflectional affixes and conjugate verbs to express tense, (2) Arabic employs three verb forms—present, past, and imperative—whereas English has four: present, past, perfect, and future, (3) the passive voice in Arabic is a morphological process, while in English, it is a morphosyntactic process, and (4) only the present verb form in Arabic is marked for the indicative, subjective, and jussive moods, whereas in English, the subjunctive mood is indicated by using either the past verb form or the infinitive without “to”.

As a result, it is likely that Arabic and English exhibit asymmetry due to their different grammatical structures. In Arabic, a verb lexeme has three forms: past, present, and imperative. The past and present forms can only, when combined with other affixes, indicate various verb tenses in Arabic ([Btoosh, 2019](#); [Shamsan and Attayib, 2015](#)). To express the

future tense in Arabic, one can add the prefix “s-” or the particle “sawfa” to the present form, which corresponds to the English modal auxiliaries “will” or “going to” (Shamsan and Attayib, 2015, p. 141).

*The morphology of English past tense of Arabs*

L2 Arab learners of English face various grammatical challenges, including incorrect verb tense usage, subject-verb agreement errors, and the omission of tense markers, copula, and auxiliary verbs (Alfaifi and Saleem, 2024; Btoosh, 2019; Kahoul, 2014; Shamsan and Attayib, 2015; Zaidia, 2022). For example, Alfaifi and Saleem (2024) observed syntactic errors in the Arab’s English production, such as incorrect word order, omitted copulas, and inconsistencies in tense. Btoosh (2019) observed that Arab L2 learners frequently made use of English tense-aspect forms in their writing, with the simple present being the most commonly used. According to Btoosh (2019), EFL Arab learners tended to overuse the simple present, simple past, and past progressive tenses while underutilizing the present progressive, present perfect, and past perfect forms. Btoosh (2019) pointed out that EFL “learners’ use and nonuse of the perfective and imperfective aspects are constrained by their L1 grammar” (p. 34). Furthermore, Btoosh (2019) noted that “it is a common practice of EFL Arab learners to begin discourse with a perfective narrative verb, while all subsequent verbs are rendered in the simple present form” (p. 33).

EFL Arab learners tend to overapply the regular simple past verb form *-ed* to their irregular verb forms (e.g. *goed*, *thinked*, *catched*, and *fined*) (Mourssi, 2012). Mourssi (2012, p. 267) noted that regular verbs can be generated in an “orderly and predictable” manner due to their rule-governed nature, while irregular verbs are “chaotic and idiosyncratic” since they are learned by rote. Furthermore, Mourssi (2013b) discovered that EFL Arab learners acquire irregular simple past forms before the regular ones, suggesting that L2 Arab learners follow the same sequences as L1 English learners when it comes to learning simple past tense forms. The findings from Mourssi (2013b) support Mourssi’s (2012) observations and provide additional evidence that second language learners of English learn irregular simple past tense forms prior to regular ones.

Kahoul (2014) investigated the variability in the past tense and verbal agreement among Arabic adult English learners. The findings revealed notable differences in past tense production (including both regular and irregular verbs) between high-proficiency learners and those with lower proficiency levels. A key outcome of this study is the increased usage of irregular verbs in past tense morphology among L2 learners. This observation supports earlier EFL research (e.g. Mourssi, 2012; Mourssi, 2013b) that indicates EFL Arab learners typically produce more irregular verbs than regular ones when using the past tense. Kahoul (2014) noted that the increased reliance on irregular verbs instead of regular ones could be attributed to the instructional environment. In this setting, learners concentrated largely on memorizing lists of irregular verbs, which facilitates easier recall compared to using the regular *-ed* rule to form the past tense.

Kahoul (2014) observed that Arab learners of English with high proficiency exhibited native-like performance. In contrast, learners with low to mid-level proficiency struggled more with producing past *-ed* verb inflections using the C-t allomorph (e.g. *asked/kt/*) compared to the VV-d allomorph (e.g. *played/eid/*) or the C-d allomorph (e.g. *learned/nd/*). Kahoul (2014) concludes that variability in past tense usage and verbal agreement appears to originate from “a temporary absence of the relevant syntactic representations . . . from the L1 [which] is likely to be what makes learners take longer to instantiate the L2 features . . . [and] these representations build up with rising proficiency and thus the variability can be overcome” (p. 240).

Mastering the different types of English tenses poses significant challenges for L2 Arab English learners (Abu-Joudeh et al., 2014). For instance, Abu-Joudeh et al. (2014) found that Arab students could identify a low percentage of English verb tense errors and correct a

moderate percentage of these errors. The most straightforward tense error for them to recognize was the simple past, followed by the past perfect; in contrast, the simple present was the hardest to detect, with present perfect being slightly easier. Similarly, the simple past was the easiest tense for Arab EFL students to correct, followed by the simple present and past perfect, while the present perfect proved to be the hardest to correct. [Abu-Joudeh et al. \(2014\)](#) noted that the challenges in recognizing and correcting English tense errors among EFL Arab students originate from a “lack of focus on the form-meaning relationships at the text level” (p. 1305). They suggest that EFL Arab learners should receive effective instruction on meaning and form-focused English usage to improve their command of English tenses.

A shift from one tense to another was identified as a significant morphological challenge for Arab learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). [Fareh \(2014\)](#) noted that these learners often switched between tenses when writing in their second language, a difficulty he credited to negative transfer from their first language (L1). [Hinkel \(2004\)](#) asserts that even advanced non-native speakers (NNS) of English struggle with using tenses, aspects, and passive voice, despite years of L2 study, and they often avoid complex verb phrases in their academic writing. Furthermore, [Muftah and Rafic-Galea \(2013\)](#) observed that adult Arab English learners made considerable errors in applying English tenses, especially when distinguishing between the simple present tense and others. These researchers attribute this issue to L1 interference since the tense systems of English and Arabic differ significantly, resulting in both positive and negative influences on L2 acquisition.

[Mourssi \(2013a\)](#) examined the impact of Arabic as L1 on the acquisition of English grammar as L2, focusing particularly on the formation of the simple past tense. The researcher argued that simple past tense forms produced by L2 learners “sometimes appear to have originated in L2 and sometimes in L1” (p. 397). The study revealed that many past tense structures created by Arab adult EFL learners reflected a crosslinguistic influence from Arabic in their L2 English grammar acquisition. [Mourssi \(2013a\)](#) attributed this influence to both L1 transfer and overgeneralization. Arab EFL learners tended to apply rules from their L1 while also overgeneralizing forms in the L2 that differ from the simple past tense. Approximately 7.3% of errors made by Arab EFL learners were linked to negative interference from Arabic. Furthermore, many Arab EFL learners approach tasks in their target language by thinking in their first language ([Mourssi, 2013a](#)).

Based on the research reviewed above regarding L2 and EFL, the findings from studies on the English past tense among Arab EFL learners appear mixed. There is a lack of research focused on the English tense-aspect usage of Saudi EFL learners. This study supports the assertion that “there is a general lack of knowledge of the acquisition [of tense and aspect produced by EFL learners] of non-Indo-European languages” ([Bardovi-Harlig, 1999](#), p. 369). It aims to investigate the English past tense usage among Saudi adult EFL learners to gain a better understanding of how they acquire this morphological development and the types of morphological errors they may produce.

#### *The influence of aspect hypothesis on the acquisition of past morphology*

Recent research on second language (L2) acquisition indicates that the Aspect Hypothesis (AH), evaluated over the past two decades, reveals that L2 learners’ acquisition of past morphology is influenced by lexical aspectual categories, particularly perfective forms tied to telic predicates ([Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2020](#)). According to the researchers, the AH posits that the lexical aspectual categories of predicates influence how learners acquire past morphology. Specifically, it suggests that perfective forms relate to telic predicates (which have inherent endpoints), whereas imperfective forms are linked to unbounded predicates (atelic). It has been noted that lexical aspects impact Arab learners’ ability to differentiate between English tenses, especially regarding the lexical aspect of telicity ([Almakrob, 2022](#); [Almishwat, 2023](#)). [Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé \(2020\)](#) concluded that although the AH has received considerable empirical support in predicting adult L2 acquisition of past

morphology across different languages, there are still challenges related to proficiency levels, first language (L1) transfer, task variability, and methodological discrepancies that complicate data interpretation.

In their influential study on two decades of L2 tense and aspect research, [Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé \(2022\)](#) highlighted a gap between SLA research and classroom practice. They advocate for a closer integration of linguistic insights into effective language teaching methods, especially to tackle the complexities of teaching tense and aspect in second languages. In a reevaluation of the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (LAH), [Salaberry \(2024\)](#) argued that while past studies showed a link between lexical and grammatical aspects in the early stages of language learning, recent findings indicate that lexical aspect plays a more significant role at intermediate and advanced proficiency levels, contrary to the earlier claims of the LAH. [Salaberry \(2024\)](#) explained that beginner learners tend to depend on their native language and contextual cues instead of solely on lexical features, and their initial choices regarding tense and aspect are frequently guided by default past tense indicators, commonly taken from their L1.

#### *The influence of Arabic (L1) on the acquisition of English past morphology*

Research shows that Saudi EFL learners' native language (L1) affects their use of English past tense forms, leading to excessive reliance on base and present forms. This issue arises because Arabic does not overtly mark tense ([Almakrob and Alotaibi, 2020](#)). In their study, due to the lack of explicit tense marking in Arabic, learners often apply past tense markers inconsistently when constructing English past forms. As a result, students frequently overuse base forms and find it challenging to use English past markers, a phenomenon linked to interference from their L1.

Arab learners of English encounter challenges not only in applying tenses within their EFL educational settings but also in multilingual contexts. For example, [Sabra \(2020\)](#) observed that Arab L2 students in diverse educational environments had difficulty with English grammatical tenses during speaking. This struggle arises from the considerable differences in verb structures between Arabic and English, resulting in linguistic interference and various errors in usage. The study advocates for teaching strategies that enhance English proficiency among diverse students and suggests a reassessment of English language education practices to better accommodate multicultural classrooms.

In relation to cross-linguistic influence, [Zaidia \(2022\)](#) found that the transfer from Arabic has a notable impact on English language learners in Saudi Arabia. This influence causes errors in various language use areas, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, primarily due to the interference of Arabic linguistic structures. The study emphasizes that English language learners in Saudi Arabia frequently show low participation and motivation in their EFL classrooms, which may be linked to issues originating from negative L1 transfer. [Almakrob \(2022\)](#) underscores the negative impact of L1 on Saudi EFL learners' production of English past tense forms. The study calls for additional research into teaching strategies for tense and aspects, recommending that EFL teachers should provide instructional support to lower-proficiency Saudi EFL learners.

[Almishwat \(2023\)](#) noted that Arabic learners of English often find it challenging to differentiate between the simple past and present perfect tenses. They frequently apply the simple past tense from their native language in situations where the present perfect tense is necessary in English. Similarly, [Alotaibi \(2023\)](#) examined how Arabic L1 transfer affects the writing of Saudi EFL learners, revealing that 81% of students' errors were due to L1 influence, with grammatical mistakes making up 67% of the total errors. Among these grammatical errors, tense errors (32%) were the second most common in students' writing. [Alotaibi \(2023\)](#) reported that Saudi EFL learners have difficulty distinguishing between verb tenses, especially the continuous and passive forms, because there are no direct equivalents in Arabic. As a result, they often use structures from their native language when writing in English, leading to tense errors caused by negative L1 transfer.



Alfaifi and Saleem (2024) support the above argument, showing that L1 interference significantly hinders the development of English abilities, especially in adult learners. This interference causes syntactic mistakes, including incorrect word order, missing copulas, and tense inconsistencies. When it comes to L2 tense errors in English—characterized by incorrect verb forms and absent tense markers due to L1 interference—Arab learners struggle to acquire the English tense system. This is particularly true for aspects like present, continuous, and perfective tenses during the early stages of English learning. To improve students' understanding of correct English tense usage, Alfaifi and Saleem (2024) recommend using comparisons of English tenses, especially those that lack direct Arabic equivalents, to help learners distinguish between present, continuous, and perfective forms.

Khan (2024) advocates for improving the teaching of irregular morphological inflections. The study observed that explicit morphological instruction—offering students clear explanations, rules, and examples about morphemes in English—enabled Saudi EFL learners to enhance their vocabulary knowledge, recognize morphemes, and effectively use irregular inflectional forms in their writing. Instructional techniques employed in this research included visual aids, metalinguistic discussions, and a variety of teaching strategies, all of which significantly reinforced learners' understanding of morphemes.

## Research questions

RQ1. How well do Saudi EFL adult students produce the English past tense?

RQ2. How accurate is the English past tense production of Saudi EFL adult students?

RQ3. What are the morphological errors in English past tense that Saudi EFL adult students may have when they produce their oral past discourse?

This research adopts a qualitative methodology. Data collection primarily involved transcribing and coding students' natural spoken language, while a textual analysis technique was applied to investigate the oral past tense narratives produced by Saudi EFL learners.

## Methods

### Participants

Two Saudi adult EFL students voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. The reason for using convenience sampling and a small sample size was the difficulty the researcher faced in recruiting a larger number of Saudi L2 participants while attending an international conference in Australia. For qualitative research, gathering and analyzing natural L2 production from a limited number of participants is considered appropriate and common practice. The participants were enrolled in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses as preparation for entry into a postgraduate program at two prestigious English language centers in Australia. Both participants were male graduate students whose first language is Arabic, and pseudonyms were used in this study. A questionnaire revealed that Abdullah holds a bachelor's degree in computer science and is applying for a master's degree in the same field. In contrast, Omar has a master's degree in education and is pursuing a Ph.D. Abdullah is 26 years old, while Omar is 31. Neither had taken any international English language tests, and both exhibited intermediate English proficiency levels. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), their proficiency levels range from B1 to B2, indicating they are independent learners of English. They have participated in a 45-week intensive English program to fulfill the language requirements for postgraduate admission. According to their self-ratings on a questionnaire, Abdullah rated his speaking ability as 3 out

of 5, while Omar rated his as 4 out of 5. Their exposure to English amounted to nine years for Abdullah and six years for Omar, which was limited during their schooling and university education in Saudi Arabia. However, they did take several English for General Purposes (EGP) courses during their undergraduate studies. At the time of the study, Abdullah had completed 25 weeks, and Omar had completed 20 weeks in EAP courses. Residing in Australia and having undertaken a significant number of EAP weeks likely contributed to improvements in their English language proficiency.

#### *Data collection method*

The data gathered consisted mainly of the learners' oral narratives in the past tense, aligning with L2 research focused on language production (e.g. [Almakrob and Alotaibi, 2020](#); [Bardovi-Harlig, 2000](#)). Each student was asked to tell an event related to a task designed for this study. This involved narrating a past event for approximately 15 min. The students' oral past productions were recorded with a digital recorder and subsequently transcribed for analysis in the study.

#### *The study task*

In about 15 minutes, please talk about a difficult time that you had before you arrived in Australia.

#### *Data Analysis method*

The researcher analyzed the transcripts of the students' oral narratives in the past tense, focusing on features such as regular and irregular verb forms, adverbials, connectives, and past markers. Additionally, the study assessed the accuracy of past tense use to gain insight into the types of errors students make. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods were utilized to evaluate the students' oral performance in the past tense. For coding the morphological features of past tense in oral transcripts, the present study identified the "utterance of the past situation" (UPS) as the primary unit of analysis. UPS is defined here as a complete (i.e. perfective) past action, linked to its morphological verbs and any relevant temporal adverbials and references. An example of the coded UPSs in this research is provided below:

[When I was in Saudi Arabia, I received my admission from X University in Australia]—one UPS.

Following the coding and tallying of sentences, regular and irregular verb forms, and past markers in the student oral transcripts, grammatical checks were performed to assess the accuracy of past tense formation. This study developed three linguistic indices in line with L2 research (e.g. [Alamir, 2014](#); [Bardovi-Harlig, 1999](#); [Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998](#)). These indices were designed to analyze the variation and accuracy of past tense usage along with the morphological features produced by students. To facilitate statistical comparisons, the results of the linguistic measurements were multiplied by 100, yielding scores formatted to two decimal places. The linguistic indices created and utilized in this study are defined below.

#### (1) The Variation of Regular Verbs

$(RV/UPS) = \text{the percentage of regular verbs (RV) in the produced utterance of the past situation (UPS)}.$

#### (2) The Variation of Irregular Verbs

$(IRV/UPS) = \text{the percentage of irregular verbs (IRV) in the produced utterance of the past situation (UPS)}.$

#### (3) The Accuracy of Past Tense Variation

$(EFUPS/UPS) = \text{the percentage of the error-free utterance of the past situation (EFUPS) in the produced utterance of the past situation (UPS)}.$



(EFRV/UPS) = the percentage of error-free regular verbs (EFRV) in the produced utterance of the past situation (UPS).

(EFIRV/UPS) = the percentage of error-free irregular verbs (EFIRV) in the produced utterance of the past situation (UPS).

## Results

### Results of quantitative analysis

After analyzing the complete set of student oral narratives in the past tense (totaling 1,164 words), students produced 79 UPS (Abdullah = 55% UPS and Omar = 45% UPS), where they shared their travel stories using the English past tense. The frequencies and percentage scores of the morphological features related to the English past tense were computed and compared regarding occurrences and accuracy across all students' 79 UPS.

Table 2 indicates that students exhibited different frequencies and percentages in their oral use of the English past tense. Notably, students demonstrated a higher percentage (34.5% compared to 18%) of regular verbs (e.g. *said, received, decided, traveled*) over irregular verbs (e.g. *met, made, saw, told*) in their narratives. This finding suggests that students may have acquired regular verbs more quickly than their irregular counterparts in their IL system. Additionally, students might have found it simpler to use regular verbs than irregular verbs due to the challenge of memorizing a sufficient number of irregular forms and incorporating them into their oral past tense expressions. Another possibility is that students may not have encountered irregular verbs in past tense contexts as often during their high school and tertiary education compared to regular verbs. Such limited exposure likely hindered their ability to frequently recall or utilize irregular verbs in their past-tense storytelling.

To evaluate the accuracy of past tense usage, students demonstrated a higher frequency (47 EFUPS = 60%) of correctly employing past tense sentences in their speaking. This accuracy was more apparent in their use and formation of irregular verbs compared to regular verbs (70% versus 60%), as illustrated in Table 3. It appears that students have developed a better appropriateness of irregular verbs within their IL system despite frequently using regular verbs. The EFUPS indicates a relatively high percentage of error-free usage, revealing

**Table 2.** The past tense features of students

Past tense features	Frequencies	Percentages
Regular verbs (RV)	52	34.5%
Irregular verbs (IRV)	27	18%
Adverbials (ADV)	33	22%
Connectives (CON)	34	22.5%
Past Markers (PM)	5	3%
Total and percentage	151	100%

**Source(s):** Author's data analysis

**Table 3.** The past tense accuracy of students

Past tense features	Frequencies	Percentages
Error-free UPS (EFUPS)	47	60%
Error-free regular verbs (EFRV)	31	60%
Error-free irregular verbs (EFIRV)	19	70%

**Source(s):** Author's data analysis

that 60% of the students' past tense formations are correct. This finding suggests that while students have acquired the ability to use the English past tense appropriately, they still need additional time to refine certain past tense issues. Additionally, the error-free irregular verb (EFIRV) rate in students' sentences was found to be greater (70% versus 60%) than that of error-free regular verbs (EFRV). Students exhibited more success with irregular verbs than with regular ones, likely because they produced irregular past verbs less frequently, allowing them to focus more on ensuring accuracy with irregular forms.

Students employed adverbial expressions (e.g. *after that, then, when*), connective words (e.g. *and, because, so*), and past markers (e.g. *last year, in March, 15th February*) to reference past events. Table 2 indicates that the percentages of adverbials (ADV) and connectives (CON) in the students' UPSs are nearly equivalent at 22% and 22.5%, respectively. While the rates of ADV and CON may be viewed as low, they play a crucial role in aiding students' production of morphological verbs associated with the English oral past tense. Additionally, past markers (PM) appeared to be the least utilized morphological feature among students, with a notably low percentage of just 3%. This suggests that students may need further instructions on effectively integrating past tense markers into their IL system. The observation of these markers could assist students in narrating events in a chronological and meaningful way, despite their infrequent usage in oral past tense contexts. Notably, most past tense markers identified in students' oral sentences were used to formulate irregular past tense verbs. Therefore, it can be concluded that students have a more substantial knowledge of using past tense adverbials and connectives compared to their usage of past tense markers in their IL system.

### *Results of qualitative analysis*

#### (1) Adequacy of English Past Tense

The qualitative analysis results clearly indicate that students utilized and generated the English past tense in various manners, which will be explored in the subsequent paragraphs.

Excerpt#1:

Omar: [When I **finished** these doing, I **told** my family I will travel to study in Australia]

[We **stayed** at hotel in Kuala Lamboor in Malaysia]

Abdullah: [When I **was** in Saudi Arabia, I **received** my my admission from X university in Australia]  
[Then, in this day I **traveled** from Saudi Arabia in 14th 15th February to by by airlines from Saudi Arabi].

As noted in excerpt #1, Saudi EFL learners effectively used simple past forms of English verbs when reporting their travel stories. Additionally, they incorporated adverbial clauses (e.g. "*when I finished . . .*" and "*when I was . . .*"). This demonstrates that students not only utilized the past tense in its basic form but also employed it more complexly with relative and subordinating clauses. Such usage indicates that students have acquired the English past tense, suggesting that their EFL instruction may have supported their interlanguage development, enabling them to correctly use past tense forms and adverbial clauses.

Excerpt#2:

Omar: [I **told** my family I will travel to study in Australia]

[So, when I **said** goodbye, and they **said** too, my mother **was crying**].

In excerpt#2, it was noted that Omar utilized both the simple past and the past progressive tenses. Students not only mastered the simple past tense but also incorporated the past progressive into their IL system. The use of past progressive forms by students indicates the emergence of a new morphological feature in their IL system.

Another noteworthy observation is that students narrated their past experiences in chronological order based on event occurrences. This indicates their proficiency in producing English past tense. While narrating their stories, students effectively used temporal adverbials and sequencing words (e.g. *first*, *second*, and *then*) to create a chronological narrative. For instance, in excerpt #3, Omar described and detailed his trip to Australia using this approach:

Excerpt#3:

Omar: [When I **decided** to study in Australia, I **prepared** and **did** consultation]

[The **first**, I **got** visa from Australia from their office in Dubai]

[The **second**, I **bought** some things cloth, shoes, some books, and some bags]

[But I **sold** my furniture and my car to some friends]

[**Then**, I **travelled** to Melbourne]

[**In another day**, I **went** to my school and **started** studying **in Mrach**].

Chronologically narrating events based on their occurrence, along with relevant time and place, indicates that students have successfully mastered the English past tense.

Excerpt#4:

Abdullah: [I **tried to make made** the fasting reservation]

[Then, when I **go went** from Australia **travel** sorry **traveled** from Malaysia to Australia, airline flight employees **said** sorry for our mistakes]

Omar: [He **checked** the Melway and he **know knew** this place].

Excerpt #4 illustrates that while Abdullah and Omar made grammatical errors in their use of the English past tense, they effectively recognized and corrected their incorrect past tense verbs. This indicates that students are still refining certain elements of the morphology of their English past tense within their IL system. Their interlanguage has already adopted the use of the English past tense sufficiently, allowing these students to become more aware of the mistakes they often make when forming the past tense.

Excerpt#5:

Omar: [So, I **could not forget** this time, and I **could not speak** about these times].

Another noticeable change in students' use of English past tense morphology is the appearance of new morphosyntactic structures. As illustrated in Excerpt #5, students utilized past modal verbs (like *could*) as auxiliary verbs to convey the English past tense, rather than relying solely on main verbs. Additionally, students demonstrated their understanding of the English past tense through the use of conjunctions (e.g. *and*, *but*, *so*), as observed in Excerpts #5 and #6.

Excerpt#6

Omar: [**So**, when I **said** goodbye **and** they **said** too, my mother **was crying**]

[**So**, I **could not forget** this time, **and** I **could not speak** about these time].

Abdullah: [My reservation **was** okay, **but** when I **came** another time **because** take airline from Australia, Hum I surprised my reservation is cancelled].

This observation demonstrates that students effectively used the English past tense, as indicated by their use of connective words (such as *and*, *but*, *so*, and *because*), which assist in articulating their past tense constructions.

Excerpt#7:

Abdullah: [Then, **in this day**, I **traveled** from Saudi Arabia **in 14<sup>th</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> February** to by by airlines from Saudi Arabi]

Omar: [**Last year**, I **had** a master's degree in education] [**In another day**, I **went** to my school and **started** studying **in March**].

Excerpt #7 shows that students utilized adverbial expressions (*last year* and *another day*), along with prepositional phrases (*on 14th* and *15th February*) and (*in March*), to refer to the timing of past events as tense markers. This indicates that students mastered the use of the English past tense by not only creating correct past verb forms but also by effectively indicating their temporal references and timings for past events.

## (2) Inadequacy of English Past Tense

While students formed regular verbs more often than irregular ones, they overlooked the accuracy of their regular verbs in the past tense. The most frequently observed issue in past tense formation was students using various simple present verb forms without converting them into regular past forms. Excerpt#8 illustrates some inaccurate regular past verbs produced by students.

Excerpt#8

Abdullah: [When I **arrived** to Malaysia, I **wait** my I **stop** and **wait** my another flight]

[I **ask ask** the agent from Malaysia airlines why this cancel]

[I **wait** in Australia. I **wait** in Malaysia five days because I **cannot travel** to Australia]

Omar: [I **said** to my wife I would study PhD out my country] [She **agree** with me].

The challenges students face with the past tense forms of regular verbs, such as “wait,” “stop,” “ask,” and “agree,” originate from the differences in how Arabic and English handle verb morphology. In Arabic, the morphological inflections for past tense verbs (or perfective forms) are “prefixed,” while in English, they are “suffixal.” This difference makes it difficult for students to transform certain regular verb forms related to activities, like “wait,” “stop,” and “ask,” into their appropriate past tense forms. A likely explanation is that they struggle with applying the past tense morphological inflections to some English regular verbs that end with voiceless stop sounds (/t/, /p/, and /k/) or voiced stop sounds (/d/), such as “stopped,” “waited,” “arrived,” “asked,” and “agreed.” Therefore, the differences in morphology between Arabic and English, along with the challenges of allomorphic English past tense verbs, may have hindered students’ ability to correctly form regular verbs in their spoken L2 past discourse. Additionally, students may find it hard to distinguish between regular and irregular past tense verbs.

## (3) Errors of L1 interference, overgeneralization, and simplification

Students encounter several linguistic challenges, such as overgeneralization, simplification, and first language interference, as well as difficulties in forming both regular and irregular past tense verbs in English. For instance, Abdullah, in excerpt #9, tends to incorrectly apply the progressive verb rule by adding the suffix *-ing* to regular past verbs rather than using *-ed*.

Excerpt#9

Abdullah: [Hum. I **calling** airline from Saudi Arabia, and I **made** reservation because traveling]

Also, Abdullah and Omar in excerpt#10 were observed to simplify the past tense production by using present-tense verb forms instead of past-tense verb forms.

Extarct#10

Abdullah: [I **wait** in Australia. I **wait** in Malaysia five days because I **cannot travel** to Australia]Omar: [She **agree** with me]

Another mistake in forming the English past tense, noted in excerpt #11, is the absence of the past verb form “to be” (i.e. *was* and *were*) in Abdullah’s spoken production, which can be linked to L1 interference.

Extarct#11

Abdullah: [That **good** I **am** happy feeling that who **met** this time][But I **told** him I **late** from my university]

In Arabic, the verb “to be” is technically absent from its linguistic structure. However, it often functions as an invisible verb when sentences are written or read. The following Arabic sentence illustrates a complete thought without requiring the verb “to be.”

Arabic Example: سَارَةُ طَالِبَةٌ فِي الْمَدْرَسَةِ

Arabic Transliteration: sārahu ṭālibātu<sup>n</sup> fī ʾl-madrasati

English Translation: Sara is a student in the school

## Discussion

### *The past tense performance of Saudi EFL learners*

The first research question explored how adult Saudi EFL students produce the English past tense. Descriptive statistics reveal that most English past tense forms (66%) produced by these students are regular verbs. They generate irregular verb forms at a lower rate in their past tense narratives. These results align with findings by Bardovi-Harlig (1999, 2000), which indicate that students learn regular verb forms before irregular ones in their IL system (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). Irregular verb forms appear to be learned at a later stage, as evidenced by the 66% rate of regular past verb usage in their oral production (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). However, these findings differ from some previous L2 research. For instance, Lee (1997) found that Korean EFL learners produced more irregular forms than regular ones in their oral outputs. Similarly, Mourssi (2012, 2013b) observed that EFL Arab learners mastered irregular simple past forms before regular ones. Kahoul (2014) also noted a higher production of irregular verb forms among adult L2 Arab learners. Nonetheless, Kahoul (2014) suggested that students might have exerted considerable effort in memorizing irregular verb lists, making recall easier than applying the regular -ed rule. In agreement with Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé (2020), this study posits that factors such as the type of L1 (Arabic or non-Arabic), age of EFL students (children or adults), research methodology (longitudinal, experimental, or qualitative), task type for tense-aspect production (written or spoken), and learning environment (tutored or untutored) could influence L2 learners’ acquisition of past morphology, as seen in this study and previous L2 research.

The findings suggest a need for better integration of linguistic research into effective language teaching strategies, particularly in addressing challenges related to teaching tense and aspect in second languages (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2020, 2022). Given the students’ low use of irregular verbs, potential contributing factors could include insufficient exposure to these verbs during higher education, the absence of irregular verb rules in their native language, or inadequate proficiency in English. To improve their ability to produce irregular verbs, students should be motivated to learn and memorize lists of irregular past tense verbs and practice using them in various English communicative activities. It is also advisable to implement explicit instructional techniques and strategies for teaching irregular past tense forms more effectively, as found successful in earlier studies (cf. Khan, 2024).

It is important to note that students have effectively acquired English past tense, demonstrating a considerable range of both regular and irregular verb forms. This morphological proficiency is evident in the past tense usage of “activities” (33%, such as *go, stay, and ask*) and “accomplishments” (30%, for example *buy, give, and arrive*), compared to “states” (21%, like *feel, know, and decide*) and “achievements” (16%, for instance, *complete, start, and happen*) (c.f., Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds, 1995). These results offer partial support for the aspect hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2020), indicating that students often produced past tense predicates for telic accomplishments but were less successful with telic achievements. Conversely, the frequent production of past tense predicates for atelic activities does not align with the aspect hypothesis. Consequently, the findings reveal that the acquisition of past tense morphology by Saudi EFL learners is shaped by lexical aspectual categories (e.g. Almakrob, 2022; Almakrob and Alotaibi, 2020; Almishwat, 2023). This study confirms Salaberry (2024), which argues that recent research points to a stronger influence of the lexical aspect at intermediate levels than was previously suggested by the lexical aspect hypothesis during the early stages. Additionally, students utilized various morphological features, such as adverbial expressions (e.g. *after that, then, when*), connectors (e.g. *and, but, so, because*), and past tense markers (e.g. *last year, in March*) to enhance their production of the English past tense. These results align with the majority of L2 studies examining the simple past tense among L2 learners (Almakrob, 2022; Almakrob and Alotaibi, 2020; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

The qualitative results indicate that Saudi EFL students utilized the past progressive (e.g. *my mother was crying*) to significantly enhance their use of the English past tense during performances. In this context, the progressive aspect emerges as a notable morphological feature in the students’ IL system, as it was only identified once in their spoken past tense usage. This observation aligns with Bardovi-Harlig’s (1999) assertion that “most adult second language learners rarely overextend the use of progressives” (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, p. 362).

Additionally, students narrated their past experiences sequentially. They utilized temporal markers (like *first, second, and then*) and references (such as *last year and in March*) to effectively describe past events. These observations align with earlier research (Bailey, 2013; Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Lightbown and Spada, 1999). However, students rarely employed past tense markers in their English narratives, which differs from Almakrob and Alotaibi’s (2020) findings. Notably, the low frequency of markers in the present study was only associated with irregular verb forms. This observation supports Wolfram’s (1989) hypothesis that L2 learners use more tense markers with irregular verbs compared to regular ones when constructing the English past tense. Furthermore, Alfaifi and Saleem (2024) attributed the lack of tense markers to the negative influence of the students’ first language.

Students successfully formed the English past tense using past forms of main verbs and modal verbs as auxiliaries to convey past tense scenarios. Essentially, they recognized and corrected their mistakes with past tense verbs while telling stories. This morphological progress indicates that L2 acquisition is prompting their IL system to self-correct and effectively acquire the morphology of the English past tense.

#### *The past tense accuracy of Saudi EFL learners*

The second research question explored the accuracy of students’ English past tense production. Students achieved a reasonable accuracy rate of 60% in past tense sentences, indicating their effective incorporation of the English past tense into their IL system (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). While they produced more sentences with regular verbs in their spoken past tense, the number of accurate sentences using irregular verbs outnumbered those with regular verbs. The lack of risk in using irregular verbs may have led students to focus more on accuracy, thus reducing the incidence of incorrect irregular verb usage in their spoken past tense. This tendency for students to avoid risks with irregular verbs is supported by second-language research (e.g. Btoosh, 2019; Kahoul, 2014). If students do not receive adequate

instruction on irregular past tense forms, they may face difficulties in further developing their language acquisition related to these forms (e.g. [Khan, 2024](#)).

Observably, students often used simple present regular verbs and did not convert them into past regular verbs while narrating their English past tense stories. This observation aligns with earlier studies on L2 learners, which show that Arab EFL students typically begin their stories with perfective verbs and then continue using imperfective forms ([Btoosh, 2019](#)). It also corresponds with [Almakrob and Alotaibi \(2020\)](#), which noted that students frequently overuse base forms, attributed to interference from their first language (L1). Nevertheless, many English past tense regular verbs that students inappropriately produced usually consist of regular verb forms ending in voiceless stop sounds like /t/, /p/, and voiced stop sounds of /d/. Students seem to struggle with applying the *-ed* ending to the past tense of these allomorphic verbs due to the morphological inflection differences between Arabic and English. This finding aligns with [Kahoul \(2014\)](#), indicating that Arab adult EFL learners have more difficulty producing past *-ed* verb inflections in C-t allomorphs (e.g. *asked/kt/*) than in VV-d allomorphs (e.g. *played/eid/*) and C-d allomorphs (e.g. *learned/nd/*). [Kahoul \(2014\)](#) connects this morphological challenge to the absence of syntactic representations from the Arabic language system. Furthermore, while the morphological inflections for past tense verbs (i.e. perfective forms) in Arabic are prefixal, in English, they are suffixal, which presents a challenge for students. This perspective is supported by [Btoosh \(2019\)](#), which argued that EFL learners' use and nonuse of perfective and imperfective aspects are influenced by their L1 grammar (p. 34).

Moreover, the transition between tenses emerged as a major morphological issue for students in this study, aligning with findings from earlier L2 research (e.g. [Fareh, 2014](#)). [Fareh \(2014\)](#) linked this challenge to negative transfer from the L1, but it may also originate from the prefix-based perfectives in Arabic, which differ from the suffix-based perfectives in English. Consequently, many Arab EFL learners might tend to use simple present tense forms to avoid errors while reporting past narratives. Students need to receive adequate instruction on English tenses, accompanied by clear explanations, rules, and illustrative examples focusing on the structure and function of morphemes ([Khan, 2024](#)).

While students were able to recognize some errors related to the simple past tense verbs and attempt self-corrections, they struggled to identify incorrect simple present tense verbs and convert them to the past tense. This observation aligns with the findings of [Abu-Joudeh et al. \(2014\)](#), which indicated that simple present tense errors are particularly challenging for students to detect and repair, especially compared to other English tense errors. Similarly, [Almakrob and Alotaibi \(2020\)](#) suggested that this difficulty might originate from the influence of students' first language (L1), which often leads to an overuse of the base forms of English verbs. To improve students' use of English tenses correctly, [Alfaifi and Saleem \(2024\)](#) proposed that comparing English tenses, especially those that lack direct equivalents in Arabic, could aid learners in distinguishing between various tense forms.

#### *The past tense errors of Saudi EFL learners*

The third research question focused on the morphological errors in L2 English past tense formation. It revealed that students made various morphological tense errors, such as overgeneralizations, simplifications, and influences from their first language. This aligns with earlier EFL research where Arab EFL learners commonly overgeneralize English tense rules, simplify tense forms and structures, and exhibit L1 interference (e.g. [Almakrob, 2022](#); [Alotaibi, 2023](#); [Mourssi, 2012](#); [Mourssi, 2013a](#); [Zaidia, 2022](#)). The findings of this study affirm that the majority of English tense errors among Arab EFL learners may be derived from interlingual errors related to L1 (e.g. L1 interference) or intralingual errors from L2 (e.g. challenges in using English tenses) ([Mourssi, 2013a](#)). It also emphasizes how L1 negatively impacts the English past tense forms produced by Saudi EFL learners, suggesting a need for further investigation into effective teaching strategies for tenses and aspects ([Almakrob, 2022](#)). Despite the distinct



grammatical structures of Arabic and English, identifying the sources of English tense errors among Arab EFL learners remains challenging, as Arabic's morphological and syntactical systems differ from English in both form and meaning. Additionally, the current study supports [Bardovi-Harlig \(2000\)](#) in noting that SLA lacks sufficient evidence to assess the impact of the first language. Raising students' awareness about the linguistic differences between Arabic and English can enhance their proficiency in English, especially regarding correct tense usage (cf. [Alfaifi and Saleem, 2024](#); [Zaidi, 2022](#)).

#### *Relating findings to second language acquisition (SLA) and L2 pedagogy*

Saudi EFL learners' acquisition of past tense morphology is affected by the lexical aspectual categories defined in the aspect hypothesis (cf. [Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé, 2020](#)). The students often produced various past tense predicates characterized as telic and atelic, including activities, states, accomplishments, and achievements. The study's results partially confirm the aspect hypothesis, showing higher usage rates of past tense accomplishment and achievement verbs produced by Saudi students. However, students were observed to utilize past tense activities more frequently than other types of past tense predicates, which contradicts the hypothesis. EFL instructors must ensure their students are effectively exposed to both telic and atelic past tense verbs and that they can use them appropriately in authentic English contexts.

Additionally, the study's results support [Salaberry \(2024\)](#)'s, which claims that recent findings indicate a more significant impact of the lexical aspect at intermediate levels compared to what the lexical aspect hypothesis previously proposed during the initial stages. This study supports Salaberry's assertion, yet it posits that additional factors, including students' language proficiency, task type, and language exposure, may also impact the lexical aspectual categories of their English past tense. Moreover, the observed overgeneralization errors in the students' past tense verb production align with Interlanguage Theory ([Selinker, 1972](#)), indicating learners create provisional forms that show a transitional phase between their first and second language proficiency. The students applied grammatical rules they had internalized, despite these rules not being fully accurate when they produced English past tense verbs. Furthermore, instances of self-repair in the students' language output support the Noticing Hypothesis ([Schmidt, 1990](#)), as students not only recognized their past tense verb errors but also addressed them prior to successfully acquiring the correct forms. It was also observed that students achieved greater accuracy in past tense usage when they concentrated on their inaccurate forms, facilitating the acquisition of past tense morphological structures.

#### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study's quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that Saudi EFL students employed the English past tense, producing varying rates and qualities in their spoken discourse. They utilized the English past tense with regular and irregular verbs, adverbial phrases, conjunctions, tense markers, past modal verbs, and progressive forms, demonstrating their ability to narrate past events sequentially. While students demonstrated a satisfactory rate of correct regular verb usage, they paid less attention to the accuracy of these verbs compared to irregular verbs. Moreover, their spoken discourse reflected a narrow range of irregular verbs and past tense markers. Although self-repair efforts were made by students when using the English past tense, these did not eliminate other L2 errors, such as overgeneralization, simplification, and interference from their first language. In conclusion, Saudi EFL adult learners still struggle with the accurate use of past tense verbs, especially concerning a diverse range of irregular verbs and past tense markers in their spoken language, even after years of English exposure in their EFL learning. To address this issue, it is essential to implement explicit instruction and effective techniques for teaching English tenses in Saudi EFL classrooms.

This study has some limitations worth noting. First, the small participant sample and the short duration of the oral production task may have impacted the results. To improve the validity

and generalizability of findings in Arab and Saudi EFL research, it would be advantageous to recruit a larger sample and motivate participants to produce more instances of English past tense. Furthermore, using inferential analyses with a larger sample, instead of depending solely on descriptive statistics, could provide more substantial evidence and improve the credibility of the quantitative outcomes. Future research should explore how Arab and Saudi EFL learners use other English tenses in addition to the past tense, as well as identify effective pedagogical methods and strategies that enhance their L2 instruction and acquisition of English tenses.

### *Implications for the instruction of English tenses in Saudi EFL classrooms*

There are several practical considerations for enhancing the effectiveness of tense instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms. Firstly, Saudi EFL students must receive instruction on all English tenses in a single session to aid in their understanding of past versus other tenses. It is beneficial to compare English tenses to clarify their different structures and uses. Secondly, EFL instructors should incorporate explicit instructional methods and strategies when teaching English tenses, particularly for irregular verb forms. These techniques can include visual aids, discussions about language, and targeted practice through communicative exercises. Instructors are encouraged to design activities that simulate communicative situations where past tense forms are commonly used. When students exhibit confusion or difficulties with tense usage, instructors should recreate specific tense-related contexts within the classroom. Additionally, providing students with real-life scenarios and role-plays can enhance their understanding of how to differentiate between the forms and meanings of English past and other tenses. Moreover, exposing students to authentic materials that showcase English tenses is essential. Utilizing tense timelines and encouraging students to create visual representations of tense timelines for their written sentences can enhance their awareness of appropriate tense usage. To effectively memorize irregular past verb forms, EFL instructors can foster student motivation by incorporating competitive activities and rewarding proper usage. Encouraging students to engage with online quizzes and games tailored to evaluate their knowledge and use of English tenses can increase motivation and improve language learning.

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