

Iraqi EFL Learners' Knowledge and Use of Adverbial Clauses of Time: A Diagnostic Error-Analysis Study

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Abstract

The study is based on a descriptive diagnostic design in which the population consists of 50 fourth-year students in the Department of English at the Islamic University in Najaf taking a 40-questions grammar test. It consisted of four elements: identifying subordinators, sentence filling, sentence merging, and correcting an error. Overall performance (mean total score 24.40 / 40, 61%). The best performance (72%) was on the subordinator recognition task suggesting learners can identify well-formed examples of common time subordinators (when, while, before, after, until, and since) in controlled contexts. The findings indicate that Iraqi EFL learners have partial knowledge of adverbial clauses of time, which is still not sufficient, because more contextualized explicit instruction is needed, which combines form, meaning and use.

Keywords: adverbial clauses of time; Iraqi EFL learners; temporal subordinators; tense agreement; error analysis; diagnostic grammar test.

معرفة واستخدام متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية العراقيين كلغة اجنبية للجمل الظرفية الزمنية : دراسة تشخيصية لتحليل الاخطاء

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ملخص

تستند الدراسة إلى تصميم تشخيصي وصفي، حيث شملت العينة ٥٠ طالباً في السنة الرابعة بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة الإسلامية في النجف، الذين خضعوا لاختبار قواعد لغوي مكون من ٤٠ سؤالاً. وتضمن الاختبار أربعة عناصر: تحديد أدوات الجملة الفرعية، واستكمال الجمل، ودمج الجمل، وتصحيح الأخطاء. وكان الأداء العام (متوسط الدرجات الإجمالية ٢٤.٤٠ / ٤٠، ٦١٪). كان أفضل أداء (٧٢٪) في مهمة التعرف على أدوات التبعية، مما يشير إلى أن المتعلمين قادرين على تحديد أمثلة جيدة الصياغة لأدوات التبعية الزمنية الشائعة (when، while، until، after، before، و (since في سياقات محددة. تشير النتائج إلى أن متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية العراقيين لديهم معرفة جزئية بجمل الظرف الزمني، وهي معرفة لا تزال غير كافية، لأن هناك حاجة إلى تعليم صريح أكثر ارتباطاً بالسياق، يجمع بين الشكل والمعنى والاستخدام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جمل الظرف الزمني؛ متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية العراقيون؛ أدوات التبعية الزمنية؛ اتفاق الأزمنة؛ تحليل الأخطاء؛ اختبار قواعد اللغة التشخيصي.

1. Introduction

Grammar is still very much a part of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning since it allows learners to arrange their words, phrases and sentences to allow meaningful and correct communication (Azar & Hagen, 2017). In academic contexts, grammatical competence is particularly relevant since learners need to be able to produce clear, coherent and syntactically well-controlled written discourse. While communicative competence involves more than grammar, grammatical knowledge still enhances the ability to express relationships between ideas with accuracy (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

The system of subordinate clauses is one significant aspect of English grammar. A clause is a word group that has at least a subject and a verb. An independent clause has all the elements of a complete, thoughtful sentence, while a dependent clause cannot be a complete sentence on its own; it needs to be paired with an independent clause (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Adverbial clauses are dependent clauses, they function as adverbials within the larger clause structure, usually signaling relations of time, reason, condition, concession, or manner (Biber et al., 1999; Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990; Quirk et al., 1985).

A subset of these clauses called adverbial clauses of time are introduced by temporal subordinators like when, while, before, after, until, since, or as soon as. They indicate the type of temporal relations between actions: sequence, simultaneity, duration, and time limits. For instance, consider the following sentence: *I will call you when I arrive*. This consists of a main clause and a subordinate clause. These structures are fundamental to discourse cohesion since they permit speakers and writers to organize events and to place actions in logical sequential order (Biber et al., 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 2006).

The subordination which characterizes adverbial clauses of time when used to express temporal relations can be difficult for Arabic-speaking learners of English, including Iraqi EFL learners, since they must control both choice of subordinator and tense selection. One rule that is quite challenging states that English generally uses the simple present, not the future with will, in future time clauses This means we say: *I will go home after I finish the exam*. The study acknowledges that errors may be attributed to multiple factors, including potential first-language transfer (Swan & Smith, 2001), limited exposure, and insufficient form-focused instruction. However, the current study does not conduct a cross-linguistic comparison; rather, it diagnostically identifies the patterns of errors in learners' production.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the knowledge of adverbial clauses of time by Iraqi EFL learners and the most common errors committed in the usage of such clauses. The study uses a dual focus on both recognition and production to demonstrate the grammatical strengths and weaknesses of learners and provides some relevant pedagogical procedures that may help learners better utilize various complex sentence structures in writing.

1.1 Aims of the Study

This study aims to explore how first language shapes the way Iraqi EFL learners produce temporal subordinate clauses.

It also attempts to find out the most common mistakes committed by learners in the employment of adverbial clauses of time.

Finally, it aims to offer pedagogical implications on the better teaching and learning of temporal subordination in EFL contexts.

1.2 Research Questions

1. To what extent do Iraqi EFL learners demonstrate knowledge of adverbial clauses of time?
2. What are the most common error patterns in Iraqi EFL learners' use of adverbial clauses of time, and to what extent might these errors be related to possible L1 influence?

1.3 Scope and Limitations

The study is a single case of 50 fourth-year Iraqi EFL learners in a single university. As a result, the findings should not be broadly generalized to all Iraqi EFL learners. It is limited to investigating adverbial clauses of time only and has nothing to do with adverbials of reason, condition, purpose, concession or contrast clauses.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Grammar in EFL Learning

Grammar gifts learners the tools of structure they need to interpret and generate coherent language.(Azar & Hagen, 2017; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). In some EFL settings where natural English input is not readily available, controlled grammar instruction can provide a major pathway for grammatical proficiency in sentence formation among learners (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Ellis, 2008). According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), grammar is the system of rules that describes how words combine into phrases, clauses, and sentences.

This structural knowledge assists learners in both understanding the language and in their language production.

However, modern approaches to grammar teaching do not consider grammar to be just about memorized rules. Larsen-Freeman (2003) suggests that instruction in form, meaning and use should be integrated. This means learners need to receive input not just about the shape of a grammatical form, but also what it actually means and when it has the right, or sociolinguistic, use. This position is related to the adverbial clause of time since the forms of the clause, the temporal meaning that the adjoiner conveys, and the time tenses between the subordinate and the main clause are all important for learners.

The learning of grammar from a language different from their first language would thus be hindered by negative cross-linguistic transfer for learners whose first language is qualitatively different than English. According to Swan & Smith (2001), learners frequently transfer their first language patterns into English, which may lead to like problems of word order, choice of tense, and its connection with a clause. These problems especially apply to Arabic learners who literally translate their complex English sentences.

2.2 Adverbial Clauses

The adverbial clause is a type of subordination that serves a function similar to that of an adverb. Depending on their syntactic and semantic function, they may modify a verb, an adjective, an adverb, or even an entire clause. According to Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), adverbial clauses can be included as various dependent structures contributing circumstantial information and Biber et al. importance in the expression of logical and discourse relations between clauses (Cohesion, 1999).

Subordinate clauses with such renegade usage are dependent clauses introduced by subordinate and relative clauses with adverbial elements such as because, although, if, when, before, and while. They are subordinators and indicate the semantic relationship from the dependent clause to the main clause. According to Carter and McCarthy (2006), these clauses are crucial in spoken and written English as they help speaker and writer connect ideas by providing background information and ordering discourse in a coherent manner.

An adverbial clause can appear in a few different places. It may come before or after the clause to which it relates, and in certain instances may be positioned in the middle. Adverbial clauses at beginning often set up the scene prior to the matrix clause, but final

clauses can add content after the main clause (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Positioning flexibility tends to create serious problems for novices especially with punctuation and sentence completeness.

2.3 Adverbial Clauses of Time

Adverbial clauses of time define the relationship of the time of an action of one clause to another action of the main clause. They are typically introduced by subordinators such as when, while, before, after, since, until, and as soon as (Azar & Hagen, 2017; Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990). These temporal subordinators convey distinct meanings. For example, while often indicates simultaneity or duration, before and after indicate sequence, until indicates continuation to a point, and since indicates a point of origin with reference to subsequent time (e.g., *She left before I arrived*).

One common characteristic of English time clauses is the connection between temporal sense and tense choice. In the future tense, English generally uses the simple present, instead of will, in the subordinate time clause. So the correct form is I will go home after finishing the exam, not I will go home after I will finish the exam. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) have noted that this is a common error for EFL learners due to the fact that learners may expect future meaning to be marked by future tense in each of the clauses.

To use time clauses well, learners have to put together a series of choices including the type of subordinator, the subordinator tense, the intended meaning, punctuation, and sentence completeness. So, these errors aren't purely structural; they likely result from an insufficient mental model of how English expresses temporality. This gives teachers an insight into the source of the difficulties encountered by learners, whether these arise from form, meaning or use.

3.1 Practical framework

3.1 Methodology

1. Research Design

The study used a descriptively diagnostic design integrating quantitative marking with qualitative error analysis. Its quantitative attached assessed their functioning fundamentally through methods for mean scores and proportions across four test parts. The qualitative

section categorized the errors found in the students' responses by error category, example, and corrected form.

2. Participants

Participants were 50 4th stage student at the Department of English at the Islamic University in Najaf. The participants were Iraqi EFL learners both male and female from an Arabic background. They were chosen as they had already taken advanced grammar courses, and we expected students to have background knowledge of subordinate clauses, particularly adverbial clauses of time.

3. Instrument

The primary instrument was a diagnostic grammar test that was developed to measure learners knowledge and use of adverbial clauses of time. The test consisted of 40 items, equally divided into 4 sections: recognition of subordinator (based on correct interpretation of a single-word subordinator), sentence completion, sentence combination, and sentence correction. There were four sections in the questionnaire, each of which had a maximum score of 10 marks giving a total maximum score of 40 marks. The sections chosen were aimed at taking the users from cognizance through regulated as well as efficient use.

4. Data Collection Procedure

The diagnostic test was given in the regular class period. Students completed the test independently. Responses were then scored by section on the test, and overall performance was tabulated. Instead, productive and corrective errors were further classified into six categories: wrong temporal subordinator, wrong tense in the time clause, sentence fragment, punctuation error, incompatible wording (e.g. meaning deviation), and other errors.

5. Data Analysis

Analysis was performed by calculating descriptive statistics of the data. Mean scores and recognizability per test section and overall test score were obtained. Error frequencies and percentages were also computed to identify the prevalent types of errors. Results were classified based on the measure type, in that recognition items reported on the learners' knowledge of temporal subordinators, while completion, combination, and correction items reported on their implementation of that knowledge in situ.

3.2 Results

1. Students' Performance in the Diagnostic Test

Table 1 presents students' performance in the diagnostic test of adverbial clauses of time. The table shows the number of items, maximum score, mean score, percentage, and performance level for each test section.

Table 1. Students' Performance in the Diagnostic Test of Adverbial Clauses of Time

Test section	Number of items	Maximum score	Mean score	Percentage	Performance level
Subordinator recognition	10	10	7.20	72%	Good
Sentence completion	10	10	6.40	64%	Moderate
Sentence combination	10	10	5.70	57%	Weak to moderate
Error correction	10	10	5.10	51%	Weak
Total	40	40	24.40	61%	Moderate

The results show that the participants demonstrated a moderate overall knowledge of adverbial clauses of time. The overall mean score was 24.40 (range 0–40) or 61% of the total test mark. These data suggested that the learners had some knowledge of temporal subordination, as they were able to generalize the structure to various contexts, but had not yet produced the structure in fully productive contexts.

Its performance achievement is highest that was seen on subordinator recognition with the mean of 7.20 over all 10 or 72. This implies that a number of learners would likely identify prototypical temporal subordinators (e.g., when, while, before, after, until and since) when they are presented in clear and controlled lexical contexts. Thus recognition seems to be more powerful than productive use.

In sentence completion, where learners got a score of 6.40 out of 10, or 64%, performance was poorer. The findings suggest that, while students were able to select appropriate subordinators for some sentences, comprehension of subordinator meaning and tense relationship together proved difficult for them

The score for the combination of sentence combination was 5.70 out of 10, or 57% on average, so we found this somewhat lower. A time clause is used to consolidate two basic sentences into one complex sentence; this implies, in fact, that learners struggled to merge them properly. These challenges may relate to the order of the clauses, the punctuation, the sequence of tenses, and the semantic relation between the two events expressed in the two clauses.

Error correction came out the weakest performing with a mean score of only 5.10, 51%. This suggests learners struggled with recognizing and correcting errors dealing with the use of tense, punctuation, sentence completeness and temporal meaning. The low score is unsurprising, however, as this section was not only awareness but also required metalinguistic awareness since the rule had to be spelled out, indicating that learners' explicit knowledge of the rule did not always transfer into correct correction.

2. Frequency and Percentage of Errors

Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of the major error categories observed in learners' use of adverbial clauses of time. It also provides examples from learner responses and corrected forms.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Errors in the Use of Adverbial Clauses of Time

Error category	Frequency	Percentage	Example from learner response	Corrected form
Wrong temporal subordinator	58	23.6%	I will call you until I arrive.	I will call you when / as soon as I arrive.
Incorrect tense in time clause	64	26.0%	I will go home after I will finish the exam.	I will go home after I finish the exam.
Sentence fragment	43	17.5%	When I finished my homework.	When I finished my homework, I watched TV.
Punctuation error	36	14.6%	When she arrived we started the lesson.	When she arrived, we started the lesson.
Semantic mismatch	29	11.8%	I slept before I felt tired.	I slept after I felt tired.
Other	16	6.5%	He waited me until the bus came.	He waited for me until the bus came.
Total	246	100%	-	-

The most frequent error type refers to the category which is the incorrect tense that was found in the time clause, and it occurred 64 times, which accounts for 26.0%. This finding demonstrates that a substantial number of learners used will in subordinate time clauses when English requires the simple present for future time reference. This problem can

be illustrated with the example of I will go home after I finish the exam. The correct one is: I will go home after I finish the exam.

The second most occurring type was wrong from a temporary subordinate, with a total of 58 errors (23.6% of all errors). This class illustrates that the students sometimes chose a subordinator that was form-specifically possible but semantically inappropriate in co-text. If the meaning is that the call will happen in the arriving moment, then I will be calling you up until I get there is false. Correct forms are I will call you when I arrive or I will call you as soon as I arrive

There were 43 errors (17.5%) that were sentence fragments. They made this sort of error when producing a dependent time clause, but without the independent clause; for example, When I had finished my homework. A time clause cannot exist independently as a complete sentence and therefore it must be attached to a main clause, such as: I watched TV when I finished my homework.

Errors involving punctuation accounted for 14.6% of the total errors. Most of these errors occurred when the time clause preceded the independent clause. In English an initial adverbial clause is usually followed by a comma, for example, When she arrived, we started the lesson. This type of error indicates that students needed further practice on conventions of more complex structures in writing.

In this category, semantic mismatch accounted for 11.8% of all errors. In these cases, the learners also chose a contradictory temporal relation, as in the case of I slept before I felt tired. The corrected version I slept after I felt tired indicates a more logical order of events. 6.5% were labelled as other errors: prepositional or lexical problems happening on sentences that contained time clause but were not due to time clause directly.

3. Answers to the Research Questions

The initial research question was how much knowledge do Iraqi EFL learners have of adverbial clauses of time. The results suggest that their knowledge is average at best. It was found that participants did reasonably well in identifying temporal dependencies based on the temporal subordinators, although they performed poorly in tasks where they had to fill in, merge or fix sentences. This pattern implies separation between receptive identification and productive mastery.

The second research question focused on the types of errors that learners tend to make. The findings reveal that the most frequent errors were the misuse of tense in time clauses, imprudent choice of temporal subordinators, fragmented sentences, punctuation errors, semantic mismatch, etc. These errors suggest that learners' challenges go well beyond simply memorizing subordinator errors also arise in the areas of tense selection, clause dependency, sentence mechanics, and temporal meaning.

3.3 Discussion

The results indicated a much higher recognition than production and correction ability of Iraqi EFL learners. The educational relevance of this finding is that recognition does not guarantee proper utilization. Though learners might even know that when, before, after, until and since are temporal subordinators, they often do not know which one to choose in context and need an appropriate tense rule to apply in a compound-complex sentence.

That tense errors are so many lends further credence to the argument that adverbial clauses of time are recognised through more than just gainful knowledge of subordinators. You need to make students aware also that clause with future time are often with the simple present in English. Future meaning is semantically more foregrounded, even if the verb form is present (this rule is often particularly challenging for EFL learners). The result supports what is described in standard grammar descriptions of English time clauses in term of their unique tense behavior (Azar & Hagen, 2017; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

The inappropriate choice of temporal subordinators also points towards a lack of understanding of the exact semantic function of the subordinator, based on the surface form. Until indicates continuation to a point; when and as soon as refer to the moment an event happens. Require teaching which links form and meaning unlike differences in form, subordinators should not simply be presented as lists.

Somewhat more interestingly, the use of sentence fragments indicates that some learners do not fully acknowledge the dependent nature of adverbial clauses. Sentence that starts with when, after, before or till must be closed with a main clause unless it is used tied with a special discourse context. However, such fragments are often unacceptable in a scholarly and formal academic writing. And this is exactly why sentence-combining activities are needed: when learners practice putting together entire compound-complex sentences and not just successive words.

The punctuation errors expose latent issues in which students are not effectively bridging their grammar instruction to the conventions of academic writing. If the subordinate (time) clause is ahead of the main clause, a comma is usually required. Although this is not an error that changes meaning, it does affect accuracy in what is written and, in turn, the evolving style of academia. Given that academic writing involves writing sentences that attend to both boundaries and relations of clauses, punctuation need to be taught, not mechanically but as part of complex sentence instruction.

In general, the results indicate that integrated instruction is necessary for effective learning of adverbial clauses of time. Building on Larsen-Freeman's (2003) form-meaning-use cycle, teachers should guide learners through identifying the form of time clauses, understanding the temporal meanings of different subordinators, and engaging in practice with using the clauses in meaningful communicative settings. These include contrastive examples, form-focused instruction with focused error correction, sentence-combining tasks, and., short writing activities all of which may aid learners in transferring grammatical knowledge from recognition to production.

3.4.Pedagogical Implications

First, Concentrated focus on tense rule in future time clauses Patterns like I will call you when I arrive and She will leave after she finishes her work. learners need to practice many times before being able to use them.

Second, temporal subordinators should be taught with meaning and use. Contrasting between when, while, before, after, until, since, as soon as, etc. through timelines, examples and contextualized tasks is a good idea for teachers.

Third, sentence-combining activities are needed where learners combine two simple sentences into one correct complex sentence. Exercise that can bolster command over clause order, punctuation, and logic.

Fourth, that regular inclusion of error-correction tasks, should be included, since this was the area of weakest performance. An additional suggestion is to ask the learners not only to correct the sentences but to justify the corrections as well.

Fifth, when practicing writing, learners need to use adverbial clauses of time in writing short paragraphs, stories and scholars explain their ideas so that grammatical knowledge becomes relevant to discourse-level communication.

Conclusion

A diagnostic grammar test were used in the current study to investigate the knowledge and use of adverbial clauses of time among Iraqi EFL learners. Overall, the participants had moderate levels of knowledge, with a total mean score of 24.40 out of 40 (61%). Recognition of subordinators was the best-performing section while error correction was the weakest section. It implies that learners can recognize sub-ordinators of time in controlled contexts, but they cannot produce or remediate them correctly in more challenging contexts.

The error analysis carried out showed that the two most frequent errors in time clauses that caused problems were incorrect tense as the most frequent error type, and wrong subordinator, fragmentation, punctuation, semantic inconsistency, and others. Such a separation suggests that distractors to form, meaning, and use to these further-convolved facets of learner language end up being salient outputs, indirectly, validating that our learners' struggles are more rich than what we had presumed they were. Thus instruction should not narrowly target memorizing subordinators, but deal with tense relationships, clause dependence, punctuation, and the semantic distinctions among temporal connectors.

The research adds to EFL instructional grammar by demonstrating the facilitators and barriers to student use of adverbial clauses of time. It advises a more contextualized, contrastive, and production-oriented grammar teaching in this way in order to help learners progressing from recognition to an usage and functioning way.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research needs to involve a more representative and larger sample from different universities across Iraq to generalize the study.

Researches should not only be based on learners in the diagnostic tests but also based on their writes by studying adverbial clauses of time in learners' authentic writing samples.

Future research may contrast adverbial clauses of time with other types of adverbial clause, such as that of reason, condition, concession, and purpose.

Future studies should report the procedure for the validation of instruments, as well as reliability statistics when raw data are available.

Qualitative interviews It might collect qualitative data via interviews on learners' reasoning behind the use of subordinators or tense and aspect.

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Appendix A. Diagnostic Test Structure

The diagnostic test used in the study consisted of four sections: subordinator recognition, sentence completion, sentence combination, and error correction. The following examples illustrate the type of items included in the test.

- Subordinator recognition: Identify the temporal subordinator in the sentence: I waited until the bus arrived.
- Sentence completion: Complete the sentence with a suitable time subordinator: I will call you ____ I arrive.
- Sentence combination: Combine the two sentences using an appropriate adverbial clause of time: I finished my homework. I watched TV.
- Error correction: Correct the sentence: I will go home after I will finish the exam.

