

English Present Perfect Tense in ESP Context: The Case of Paramedical English in Iran

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Abstract

This study sets out to investigate the possible effects of interlingual and intralingual interference strategies as significant issues in causing difficulties in the acquisition of the English present perfect tense by paramedical students. To achieve the objectives, a multiple-choice test was administered to 30 first year paramedical students to assess their knowledge of rules governing the use of English present perfect tense. The results imply that the intralingual interference strategies seemed to be the cause of the most errors. Instead, the interlingual interference strategies might cause some other errors. It seems that the common cause of the errors in this study is that the present perfect tense forms and their time references in English and Persian are not the same. A tense form has more than one time reference; or conversely, one time reference is represented by more than one tense form.

Keywords: Persian learners of English, English tenses, Paramedical students

Introduction

Learning strategies are crucial in facilitating the acquisition of a language. In fact, any learning process needs a strategy to be adapted to achieve the main purpose of learning. Many researchers have defined learning strategy in many ways yet they are mostly agreed that language learning strategies are steps, behaviors and techniques used by learners to enhance and facilitate the language acquisition (Tarone, 1983; Wenden and Rubin, 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Scarcella and Oxford, 1992).

Studies on learners' errors have found that L2 learners employ certain strategies while attempting to learn a language. Little wood (1984, p. 34) suggests that "the most important conclusion drawn from error analysis is that the learner approaches the learning task with active strategies which help him to construct the rules underlying the second language". He describes such strategies as creative strategies. He further states that the most important strategies adopted by the L2 learners while proceeding gradually towards the target language are interlingual and intralingual ones. According to Keshavarz (2003), these strategies are two instances of second language learning strategies as the learner makes use of his previously acquired knowledge, be it the knowledge of the mother tongue or target language, in dealing with the present learning task. In fact, as Solati (2014, p. 37) states, interlingual ones are the

outcome of familiarity with the mother tongue and intralingual ones result from faulty or partial learning of L2. By and large, many researchers point out that interlingual and intralingual strategies are employed by second/foreign language learners regardless of their different proficiency level (Gass and Selinker, 1983; Chee, 2003; Mahmoud, 2005; Solati, 2016).

Many studies show that Persian learners tend to be affected by their L1 in the acquisition of English grammar (Keshavarz and Abdollahian, 2007; Ganaatpisheh, 2006; Sattari, 2012 and Solati, 2013, 2016). In addition to an awareness of the L1 influence, the possible effect of the TL is another important issue that has been widely discussed in the acquisition of English grammar by Persian learners (Fallahi, 1991; Keshavarz, 2003; Barzegar, 2013 and Solati, 2013, 2016). All in all, Brown (2000) avers that interlingual interference is a major factor in second/foreign language learning and interlingual interference is a significant source of errors for all learners. Likewise, Mahmoud (2005, p. 124) states that "errors indicate that EFL students depend on interlingual and intralingual strategies to facilitate learning". Such strategies, according to him, "help in case of perceived linguistic similarities and lead to problems in case of differences". Based on the above, it is reasonable to state that interlingual and intralingual interference strategies have a significant effect on the acquisition of the L2 grammar. In light of this, and because of the difficulties Persian English language learners have in the acquisition of the English tenses, the present study is conducted to study first year paramedical students' sources of problems in learning and using English present perfect tense, and examines and defines strategies adopted by them in the light of a psycholinguistic analysis

The present perfect tense: the structural and usage variation in English and Persian

In English, the present perfect tense is a verb phrase constructed with the auxiliary /have/ followed by the past participle of the principle verb, e.g., "We have said".

In Persian, the present perfect is constructed by the addition of the present copulas including /-æm/, /i/, /-æst/, /-im/, /-id/, /-ænd/ to the past participle. Examples are :

I have said. gofte-æm گفته ام

You have said. (singular) gofte-i گفته ای

He/she has said. Gofte-æst گفته است

We have said. gofte-im گفته ایم

You have said. (plural) gofte-id گفته اید

They have said. gofte-ænd گفته اند

The negative is constructed by the addition of the prefix [-næ] to the participle:

nægofte-æm "I have not said" گفته ام نه

In any two languages, the tense forms and their time references are not the same. Thus, it seems that the present perfect tense forms and their time references in English and Persian are not the same. The following categories and discussion attempt to show these relationships (Fallahi, 1991& 1992).

1. A category of present perfect tense may occur in both English and Persian. Generally, such relationship in most cases does not cause interference problems and main concern. Some examples are illustrated below:

a. He has gone to the library twice this week .

oo in hæfte do bar be ketabxaneræfte- æst

b. I have read six books today.

manemroozšeš ta ketabxande-æm.

c. Have you ever seen a peacock?

aya ta be halTavoosdide-i?

Concerning intralingual analysis, there is a possibility of confusion between present perfect and preterit for Persian learners. Nevertheless, there will be no technical error if preterit is employed in a, b and c. It is because, the adverbials “twice this week”, “today” and “ever” which have been utilized with present perfect in these sentences, can be used with preterit as well. Examples illustrated below:

He went to the cinema twice this week .

I wrote six letters today.

Did you ever see an astronaut?

2. Another category of present perfect tense may occur in English corresponds to the simple present tense and present progressive in Persian. Persian learners are confronted with real learning difficulties when trying to master this category of the present perfect. In this situation Persian learners substitute the simple present or present progressive for the present perfect tense. Some examples are illustrated below:

His sister has lived in Tabriz since 1376.

Xahær-e ooæzsal-e 1376 bebæddærTæbrizzendegimikonæd.

His sister *lives (or is living)* in Tabriz since 1376.

She has not worked for years.

Oosalhastkekarnemikonæd.

She *doesn't work (or is not working)* for years.

Persian learners may even be affected by the intralingual aspect of language learning and possibly attempt to use the simple past for the present perfect. In fact, it is possible to substitute the preterit for the present perfect tense.

His sister *lived* in Tabriz since 1376.

She *didn't work* for years.

Methods

This study is a quantitative descriptive one for describing, recording, analyzing and interpreting conditions that exist. To achieve the objectives, 15 multiple-choice items were used to assess the students' knowledge of the rules governing the use of English present perfect tense. The rules governing the use of the English present perfect tense adopted and adapted from Lim (2007, pp. 374-375) who drew up the tables based on works by grammarians such as Quirk et al. (1985), Leech et al. (1982), Thomson and Martinet (1986) and Aitken (1995). For each item in the multiple-choice test five options were provided. Within the five options for each item, only one was correct, and the others were distractors. The subjects for this study were 30 first year paramedical students, namely, nursing; midwifery; and operating room students of North Khorasan University of Medical Sciences in Iran. First year paramedical students were selected because they represent the output of the secondary school and their knowledge of English at the time of the data collection was still considered pre-university as they had received only six weeks of English instruction at the university.

Results and Discussions

According to the objectives, this study aims to examine the performance and strategies adopted by first year paramedical students in using English present perfect tense. In other words, this study aims to find out whether the errors committed by first year paramedical students in the using of the English present perfect tense might be attributed to interlingual or intralingual interference strategies. Interlingual interference strategy is the possible of the subjects' first language. Whilst intralingual interference strategy refers to the confusion that might arise as the subjects had been exposed to a large of verb forms which resemble one another in certain ways and, their possible ignorance of the rules governing the use of the present perfect tense (Solati, 2008, & 2013). The results obtained from these items are presented and discussed in Table 1 to 17.

Rule 1: a recently completed action which has a result or effect in the present.

The subjects' understanding of Rule 1 was assessed through item 1 of the questionnaire. The subjects' response to this item is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 1(Rule 1)

Item 1: Reza is looking for his keys now but he can't find them. He his keys.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. lost	deviant	44.5
B. loses	deviant	5.4
C. is losing	deviant	7.5
D. has lost	grammatical	40.3
E. losing	deviant	2.3

In item 1, the past simple tense was the most chosen distractor in the subjects' answers. In this case, the subjects are not aware that the past simple should not be used because the verb form do not indicate any connection between a recent past action and a situation at the time of speaking (indicated by the present tense verbs 'can't find'). This may be an intralingual interference because the subjects seemed to ignore Rule 1.

Rule 2: an interrupted event extending from a definite time in the past until now

Item 2 in the questionnaire assessed the use of the present perfect for an interrupted action or event extending from a definite time in the past until now.

Table 2: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 2 (Rule 2)

Item 2: We the situation to him three times already but he still doesn't seem to understand the difficult situation we are in.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. explained	deviant	27.2
B. explain	deviant	8.3
C. have explained	grammatical	36
D. are explained	deviant	2
E. are explaining	deviant	26.5

In this item as the results show, nearly half (27.2+26.5) of the subjects committed errors by using the simple past or present progressive tense for present perfect tense. One of the significant distractor is the present continuous which should not be used by the subjects as it indicates that the action is continuous and not interrupted. This seems to be an intralingual interference because the subjects ignore Rule 2 of the present perfect tense.

Rule 3: a past action that could be repeated in the present

Item 3 presents data to assess the subjects' knowledge of rule 3 of the present perfect.

Table 3: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 3 (Rule 3)

Item 3: I lions in the forest. If you go alone, your life might be in danger.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. see	deviant	12.5
B. am seeing	deviant	11.2
C. had seen	deviant	7.5
D. saw	deviant	43.5
E. have seen	grammatical	25.3

In this item, there is a possibility of confusion between the present perfect and preterit for Persian learners. Therefore, the past simple tense distracted more than a third (43.5%) of the subjects. In this case, intralingual interference might have occurred.

Rule 4: an action occurring during an incomplete period

The subjects' understanding of Rule 4 of the present perfect was assessed using item 4 of the questionnaire.

Table 4: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 4 (Rule 4)

Item 4: Mahdi is phoning his mother again. This is the third time he her this evening.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. is phoning	deviant	26.4
B. phones	deviant	27.2
C. has phoned	grammatical	27
D. had phoned	deviant	17
E. phoning	deviant	2.4

As shown in Table 4, the present subjects seemed to be unaware of using the present perfect for an action occurring during an incomplete period because more than two thirds (70.6%) used the present simple, continuous and, past perfect erroneously. Accordingly, intralingual interference might be the cause of the latter two errors, i.e. the use of the present continuous and perfect tenses. However, for the former error, the subjects seemed to be influenced by their L1 as the use of the present simple tense "phones" is the appropriate tense in Persian to convey an action occurring during an incomplete period of time. Consequently, interlingual interference might be the cause of this error.

Rule 5: an action which still has not yet finished at the time of speaking

Table 5 presents the subjects' responses for item 5 regarding the use of the present perfect tense for rule 5.

Table 5: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 5 (Rule 5)

Item 5: I them about the accident yet.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. didn't tell	deviant	17.1
B. haven't told	grammatical	41.2
C. hadn't told	deviant	8
D. don't tell	deviant	10.3
E. am not telling	deviant	23.4

Even though the temporal adverbial 'yet' is given in the item, nevertheless the data in Table 5 show that more than a fifth (23.4%) of the subjects used the present continuous tense erroneously. This error might be attributed to intralingual interference because the subjects seemed to ignore Rule 5 of the present perfect tense.

Rule 6: when the speaker asks whether an action has finished at the time of speaking because he still expects it to be completed

This rule had not been internalized by more than two thirds (78.2%) of the subjects. That is, only 21.8% of the subjects used the correct form as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 6(Rule 6)

Item 6: Mina: your breakfast yet?

Maryam: Yes, I had it at 8:30.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. Do you have	deviant	26.4
B. Did you have	deviant	29.6
C. Are you having	deviant	10
D. Had you had	deviant	12.2
E. Have you had	grammatical	21.8

The use of the interrogative form of Rule 6 of the present perfect constitutes a great difficulty for the present subjects. More than a third of the subjects used the past simple erroneously even though the temporal adverbial 'yet' is given in the item. Although the speaker (Mina) asks whether the action has finished at the time of speaking because she still expects it to be completed, more than half (56%) of the subjects used the past and present simple tenses incorrectly to indicate this action. Errors in the use of the present perfect could also be due to confusion over the way in which an auxiliary verb is combined with either the base form or the past participle of a main verb. As a result, intralingual interference might be the cause of the errors as the subjects ignored Rule 6 of the present perfect tense.

Rule 7: an action which began at a certain time in the past and still continuing at the time of speaking

Items 7, 8 and, 9 were used to test the subjects' knowledge of Rule 7 of the present perfect tense. The results are presented in Tables 7, 8 and 9 respectively.

Table 7: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 7(Rule 7)

Item 7: Reza: this is my house. I am living here with my wife.

Ali: how long here?

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. you live	deviant	27.7
B. have you been lived	deviant	10.2
C. did you live	deviant	22.2
D. were you living	deviant	13.2
E. have you lived	grammatical	26.7

As shown in Table 7, more than two thirds (73.3%) of the subjects committed errors. A significant error is the use of the ungrammatical form "you live" by more than a quarter (27.7%) of the subjects. This error might be due to the effect of L1 because Persian learners substitute simple present tense for present perfect tense in these situations. Another significant error committed by the subjects is the use of the past simple by more than a fifth (22.2) of them. Such an error might be due to the ignorance of the Rule 7.

Table 8: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 8 (Rule 7)

Item 8: That is Mr. Gurbani, who teaches me English, but he time to teach me much. I in his tuition class for a week.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. has not had have only been	grammatical	34.2
B. has no ...was only	deviant	26.6
C. not having...only being	deviant	10
D. had not had...had only	deviant	7.4
E. doesn't have...only be	deviant	21.8

The results obtained from item 8 show that near a half (26.6% + 21.8%) of the subjects used the distractors "has no... was only" and "doesn't haveonly be". This deviant construction is a literal translation of the Persian structure which is used to convey the same meaning. In fact, Persian learners have used simple present or simple past for present perfect tense in this item. This suggests that interlingual interference might have occurred.

Table 9: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 9 (Rule 7)

Item 9: More people in hospital this year than any time since the start of the health service in Iran.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. were treated	deviant	24.7
B. are treated	deviant	18.3
C. treating	deviant	12.1
D. treated	deviant	20.2
E. have been treated	grammatical	24.7

The use of the passive voice again constitutes a great difficulty in the use of the English tenses. The results show that more than three fifths (75.3%) of the subjects committed errors in the use of the passive form of the present perfect. A significant error is found in the use of the passive form of the past simple by 24.7% of the subjects. This suggests that the subjects' ignorance of Rule 7 might have caused the intralingual interference.

Rule 8: an action which began at a certain time in the past and still continuing at the time of speaking or has only just stopped

Item 10 was used to evaluate the subjects' understanding of rule 8. The subjects' responses on this item are presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 10 (Rule 8)

Item 10: We three kilometers. We need a rest now.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. walked	deviant	19.5
B. are walking	deviant	51.4
C. walking	deviant	1
D. have walked	grammatical	22.6
E. had walked	deviant	5.5

More than a half (51.4%) of the subjects used the present continuous tense erroneously instead of the present perfect. This error might be attributed to interlingual interference since in this situations Persian learners substitute Persian present progressive tense for English present perfect tense.

Rule 9: an event which began at definite time in the past and still occurring at or around the time of speaking

The subjects' knowledge of rule 9 was assessed by using item 11 of the questionnaire. The subjects' responses to this item are presented in Table 11.

Table 11: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 11(Rule 9)

Item 11:Morteza: How long Mr. Akbari?

Mahdi: I him for three years only.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. have you known have known	grammatical	40.7
B. do you know.... know	deviant	20
C. are you knowingam knowing	deviant	18.3
D. did you know.... knew	deviant	9.5
E. you know.... know	deviant	11.5

More than three fifths (59.3%) of the subjects were wrong in their responses. These errors show the subjects' disregard for the time reference (for three months) to indicate an event which began at definite time in the past and is still occurring at or around the time of speaking. In this item, intralingual interference might be the cause of the error.

Rule 10: an action which has not happened for a period of time but happening at the time of speaking**Table 12:** Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 12 (Rule 10)

Item 12: This room for months. It's good that they are cleaning it now.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. isn't cleaned	deviant	24.8
B. not cleaned	deviant	17.6
C. hasn't clean	deviant	21.6
D. hasn't been cleaned	grammatical	29.5
E. hadn't been cleaned	deviant	6.5

The subjects' confusion over a large number of verb forms seems to be the most cause of their errors in responding to item 12. The significant portions of errors are the use of the present simple tense (isn't cleaned) and the ungrammatical construction (hasn't clean) by (24.8% and 21.6%) of the subjects respectively. The latter deviant usage (21.6%) might be attributed to the influence of the L1.

Rule 11: an action which has not happened for a period of time and still not happening at the time of speaking

As shown in Table 14, only 18.6% of the subjects understood rule 11.

Table 14: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 13(Rule 11)

Item 13: Arezo: Where is Shiva?

Asal: I.....her today, but she told Mina that she would be back for dinner.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. didn't see	deviant	29.7
B. don't see	deviant	22
C. am not seeing	deviant	26.7
D. hadn't seen	deviant	3
E. have not seen	grammatical	18.6

Persian learners have used simple present, past simple or present continuous for present perfect tense in this item. The subjects seemed to be confused whether to use the present simple, past simple or the present continuous. Furthermore, the subjects appeared to be unaware of English stative and dynamic verbs as 26.6% of them used the stative verb "see" with the "-ing" form. In this case, the error might be due to the fact that in the L1 of the subjects such a classification of the verbs, i.e. into dynamic and stative verbs, is not found. Another significant error occurred in the results above is the use of the past simple tense by more than a quarter (29.7%) of the subjects. This error could be attributed to interlingual interference.

Rule 12: in a time clause when the speaker wants to emphasize that a future action will be completed before or after another action takes place

To gauge the subjects' understanding of rule 12, item 14 of the questionnaire was utilized.

Table 15: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 14(Rule 12)

Item 14: Ahmad: if you have time, please check my PC, Ali.

Ali: Ok. I'll check it when I this letter.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. finishing	deviant	13.3
B. finished	deviant	23.7
C. will finish	deviant	17.8
D. am finish	deviant	18.7
E. have finished	grammatical	26.5

The results suggest that Rule 12 of the present perfect had not been acquired by more than two thirds (73.5%) of the subjects. More than a fifth (23.7%) of the subjects used the past simple tense erroneously. Such an error might be attributed to the TL interference as the subjects ignored Rule 12 of the present perfect tense.

Rule 13: in a time clause to emphasize that a regular action is completed before or after another regular action occurs in the present

Item15 was used to test the subjects' understanding of rule 13 of the present perfect tense.

Table 16: Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Item 15 (Rule 13)

Item 15: When she..... for two hours, she usually rests for about half an hours before she continues again.

Suggested Answers	Grammaticality	Subjects (%)
A. studying	deviant	7.5
B. studies	deviant	25.5
C. has studied	grammatical	40.5
D. is study	deviant	15
E. studied	deviant	11.5

The data in Table 16 shows that 59.5% of the subjects chose the deviant choices. More than a fifth (25.5%) of them utilized the present simple tense erroneously. Such an error might be a result of the subjects' ignorance of Rule 13 of the present perfect tense.

Given the above results and discussion of the items on the use of the present perfect tense, the percentages of incorrect answers for the items are summarized in Table 17.

Table 17: Percentages of incorrect responses to Items on present perfect tense

Rule No.	Item No.	Percentage of Incorrect Answer (%)
1	1	59.7
2	2	64
3	3	74.7
4	4	73
5	5	58.8
6	6	78.2

7	7	73.3
7	8	65.8
7	9	75.3
8	10	77.4
9	11	59.3
10	12	70.5
11	13	81.4
12	14	73.5
13	15	59.5
Mean		69.62

The mean percentage of errors in the use of the present perfect tense is 69.62%. Some errors might be attributed to the subjects' L1 while most of the errors might be the result of the TL interference. As shown in Table 17, Rule 11, the use of the present perfect to indicate an action or event which (a) has not happened for a period of time and (b) is still not happening at the time of speaking, appears to be the most difficult one for more than four fifths (81.4%) of the subjects. On the other hand, Rule 5, for the use of the present perfect to indicate an action which still has not yet finished at the time of speaking, appears to be the least difficult one since only 58.8% of the subjects committed errors. Generally, as Table 17 shows, all the rules governing the use of the present perfect tense had not been internalized by more than half of the subjects.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Recommendations

This study adds to the few studies conducted so far on the syntactic errors committed by Persian learners of English in general and first year Persian midwifery students in particular. It provides data that the acquisition of English present perfect tense poses an area of difficulty for Persian learners of English. The present study may not hold the whole pitfalls or unexpected difficulties that probably occur in learning this tense in English. It would certainly require further investigation to add some information on the subject. In light of the findings, it seems that the common cause of the errors in this study is that the present perfect tense forms and their time references in English and Persian are not the same. A tense form has more than one time reference; or conversely, one time reference is represented by more than one tense form. Accordingly, Persian learners are faced with real learning difficulties when trying to master these categories of the present perfect. In this situation Persian learners substitute the simple present, past present or present progressive for the present perfect tense. This study can be used as a beginning point for establishing guidelines to suggest

appropriate techniques in the teaching of English tenses to Persian learners of English. The discussion of the results on the present perfect tense suggests that the TL interference seemed to be the possible cause of most of the errors (as in items: 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and, 15). In other words, the findings of the present study suggest that a more significant portion of the errors committed by the present subjects might have been a result of the learners' (a) ignorance of the present tense rules, (b) confusion over a large number of verb forms, (c) misunderstanding of the use of the auxiliary verbs and, (d) unawareness about the time references used to indicate the tense action. With regard to the above-mentioned errors, the subjects' ignorance of the rules governing the use of the present perfect tenses seemed to be more significant than those caused by the subjects' confusion over a large number of verb forms that resemble one another. Wrong verbal combinations and the unawareness of the time references appear to be the main causes of the errors. On the other hand, interlingual interference appeared to be the cause of some other errors that occurred in the learners' acquisition particularly for items: 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 12 and 13. In this regard, James (1998) claims that FL learners should be aware of the forms of their L1. He points out that such awareness would refine their insights into the NL and at the same time allow them to monitor its transfers into the FL (ibid, p. 261). To sum up, based on the results of the present study, using interlingual and intralingual interference strategies, with more focus on the latter ones, in teaching the English tenses in general and the present perfect tense in particular might be useful for the Persian learners of English. In this regard, Stern (1992, p. 286) emphasizes that the use of interlingual or intralingual techniques and strategies in teaching L2 learners should be decided in the L2, the context in which the programme takes place, and the ability of the teacher to function intralingually or interlingually" (ibid, p. 286). Similarly, Corder (1988, p. 133) argues that teaching is a matter of providing the learner with the right data at the right time and teaching him how to learn, that is, developing in him appropriate learning strategies and means of teaching his hypotheses".

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