Lexical aspect and the L2 acquisition of English past tense morphology by Saudi EFL learners

Ahmed Yahya Almakrob

Department of English, College of Sciences and Humanities in Al-Kharj,

Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia.

a.almakrob@psau.edu.sa

Nayef Shaie Alotaibi

Department of English, College of Languages and Translation

Al-Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

nsotaibi@imamu.edu.sa

Correspondence: Ahmed Yahya Almakrob, Department of English, College of Sciences and Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. Email: a.almakrob@psau.edu.sa

Bio-profile:

Dr. Ahmed Yahya Almakrob is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Department of English, College of Sciences and Humanities in Al-Kharj, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia. He received the IMSIU Award for Excellence in Research for his PhD dissertation, entitled "Acquisition of Arabic and English tense-aspect systems by L2 learners: a comparative study". Dr. Almakrob worked for five years at King Saud University as a Language Instructor of English at the Department of English Language and Literature and the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching. His research interests fall into L1/L2 acquisition of tense-aspect system, L1/L2 discourse and pragmatics and language testing.

Dr. Nayef Alotaibi is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, Al-Imam Mohammed in Saud Islamic University, Saudi Arabia. Dr. Nayef's research expertise is language assessment and teaching methods.

Abstract

This study examines the effect of the lexical aspect on the use of the English simple past temporal morphology by Saudi learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), with a particular reference to the Aspect Hypothesis (AH). Data were gathered from 54 Saudi undergraduate EFL learners from five levels (L3- L7), using a production task and a comprehension task. The results of the study suggest that the lexical aspect may not have a primary influence on the use of the English past morphology. Findings of the production task showed that learners are sensitive to the lexical aspect in that they first associated the past markers with achievements and accomplishments and then with activities and statives. Findings of the comprehension task, by contrast, did not support the AH whereby learners' comprehension of the simple past marker spread from accomplishment to achievement verbs. Similarly, among atelics, the learners' association of the simple past marker spread from stative to activity verbs, which is not in line with the AH, too. Remarkably, learners' first language (L1) and task variation may have an impact on the learners' use of the English past marking because their realizations of the English past marker in the production and comprehension tasks were inconsistent.

Keywords: L2 acquisition, the Aspect Hypothesis, EFL, past tense, lexical aspect

1. Introduction

Acquiring a new language requires a learner to adopt the temporality system of the target language (Smith 1997). Temporality can be expressed through different means, such as temporal and locative adverbs, tense, chronological order and tense (Klein, 1994). Aspect is another means of expressing temporality which, in turn, can be realized overtly or covertly. That is, it can be expressed through morphological inflectional markers (grammatical aspect) or lexically through the semantic properties of verbs (lexical aspect) (Smith, 1991). Encoding tense-aspect markers is a crucial element for L2 learners' language acquisition because it is an integral part of both syntactic and semantic competence (Ayoun and Salaberry, 2008). Thus, there is a considerable body of literature on the acquisition of the tense- aspect system, with a particular focus on the influence of the lexical aspect on the use of tense and aspect markers.

One approach that best accounts for the L2 acquisition of tense and aspect is known as the AH (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012; Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé, 2020). According to the AH, L1 and L2 learners tend to use aspect marking before tense markings (Andersen and Shirai, 1994).

The AH is based on the assumption that " first and second language learners will initially be influenced by the inherent semantic aspect of verbs or predicates in the acquisition of tense and aspect markers associated with or affixed to these verbs" (Andersen and Shirai, 1994, p. 133). Based on Vendler's (1967) four-way classification of verbs, the AH states that learners' acquisition of the past marking spreads from achievements (ACHs) to accomplishments (ACCs) to activities (ACTs) and finally to statives (STAs) (Bardovi-Harlig (2000).

The validity of the AH has been examined by many researchers across different languages in L1 and L2 settings. In L1 acquisition of tense-aspect system, it seems a large number of the studies in the literature are in line the AH claims whereby children are sensitive to the lexical aspect rather than tense when acquiring tense and aspect morphology. That is, children in the early stages tend to use perfective past marking with telic predicates (accomplishment and achievement), and imperfective marking on atelic (activities) (e.g., Chen & Shirai, 2010; Johnson & Fey 2006; Le, 1998; Shirai & Anderson, 1995;, 2004; Shu, 2004; Weist et al and so on). On the other hand, some studies did not confirm the AH predictions due to some factors, namely language-specificity (e.g., Bertinetto's et al. 2015), task variation and individual differences (e.g., Bar-Shalom, 2004; Filiouchkina, 2004; Wanger, 2001; Olbishevska, 2004; Stoll, 2005).

Likewise, in L2 settings, the acquisition of tense and aspect as a second language has been investigated by many researchers across several languages. The findings of previous studies are of two fold. Most of the studies revealed that there is a universality of the AH with regard to the spread of past marking across the aspectual classes, including English (Al-Surmi, 2013; Bardovi-Harlig 1998, 2000; Lee & Kim, 2007; Rocca, 2002, 2005; Mazyad, 1999; Zhao & Shirai, 2018, among others), Japanese (Shirai & Kurono, 1998), French (Ayoun & Salaberry, 2008), Spanish (Salaberry, 2002), Italian (Rocca, 2002, 2005), Francophone (Collins, 2002) and Mongolian (Qian, 2006).

Some studies, on the other hand, rejected the AH predictions in which the aspect marking distribution is not restricted to the lexical aspect (Housen, 2000; Ishida, 2005; Salaberry, 2000). Some other researchers found that there are some factors besides the lexical aspect affecting the acquisition of tense and aspect morphology, such as learner variation, language transfer, task variation and discourse narration, in languages like Catalan (Comajoan, 2006), Spanish (Salaberry, 2011), Japanese (Sugaya & Shirai, 2007), English (Housen, 2002; Rodhe, 1996, 2002,), Chinese (Ming, 2008), Italian(Rocca, 2005).

Concerning the studies of Arabic-speaking learners acquiring English tense-aspect systems, the reviewed related literature showed that a few studies have been conducted to test the acquisition of the English simple past tense, with a particular reference to the AH. For example, Mazyad's (1999) study investigated the acquisition of English tense and aspect on learners of English for specific purposes by using grammaticality judgment task, gap filling task and retelling task. Another study that investigated the L2 acquisition of English aspectual system by Arabic-speaking learners is Alruwaili's (2014) study. It paid more emphasis on the L1 influence on the acquisition of English tense and aspect marking rather than the lexical aspect. Thus, it's worth addressing the strength of the AH on Arabic-speaking learners of EFL for academic purposes in an instructional setting by using different elicitation tasks, production and comprehension tasks.

Accordingly, the main objective of this cross-sectional study examines the relative influence of the lexical aspect on the acquisition of English past marker by EFL Saudi undergraduate learners, with a particular focus on the AH. To achieve this objective, it attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Will Saudi undergraduate learners' use of the simple past be predominantly on telics or atelics?

2. Among the telics, will the learners' association of the simple past marker spread from ACH to ACC verbs?

3. Among the atelic verbs, will the learners' association of the simple past marker spread from ACT and STA verbs?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The Definitions of Aspect and Tense

Aspect is one of the verbal categories that is used for expressing temporality. Aspect, according to Comrie (1976, p. 3) refers to the "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation". By contrast, tense locates the time of a situation in which it is a deictic category (Aksu-Koq, 1988; Binnick, 1991; Comrie, 1985). The sentences, *he read the story,* and *he was reading the story,* are similar with regards to time reference, but they are not similar in terms of aspect. That is, both of the previous sentences describe an action that tool place in the past, but in terms of aspect, the first one indicates perfectivity while the other one indicates imperfectivity. So the

difference between the above sentences is not one of tense, rather it's a difference of aspect. In short, we can say that aspect has to do with the semantic or meaning of the verbs (predicates). In other words, it can be expressed lexically via the inherent meaning of the verbs or morphologically through affixation or auxiliaries (Dowty, 1979; Klein, 1994). Consequently, aspect falls into two types: lexical aspect and grammatical aspect (Smith, 1991). The following sections will deal with these two kinds of aspect in detail.

2.2.Types of Aspect

2.2.1 Grammatical Aspect

As indicated earlier, aspect is mainly classified into two categories: grammatical and lexical aspect. Grammatical aspect expresses whether an event is viewed as completed, or ongoing (Smith, 1991). As a result, grammatical aspect is concerned with how the situation is presented. Grammatical or viewpoint aspect can be realized morphologically or grammatically (Klein, 1994). In other words, grammatical aspect is indicated by inflectional markers, such as *(ed)* and *(ing)* in English or by auxiliaries such as *was* or *is* (Salaberry & Shirai, 2002; Smith, 1991).

Grammatical aspect, in turn, is divided into two classes: perfective and imperfective aspect (Smith, 1991, 1997). The former indicates the completion of an action; the latter indicates the incompletion of an action (Comrie, 1976). Perfective aspect describes a situation that has a beginning and a concluding point. For instance, the sentence, *Alex wrote a letter* indicates that the act of writing is complete (i.e. it has a beginning, a continuation and an end). Imperfective grammatical aspect, on the other hand, is characterized by the continuation of a situation with no terminal point and it describes the internal time reference of a situation (Comrie, 1976). Hence, the sentence, *Alex was writing a letter* is imperfective, indicating the continuing of the event without denoting its endpoint.

2.2.2. Lexical Aspect

Lexical aspect (sometimes also called aktionsart or inherent or situation aspect) refers to the inherent meanings of the verbs or verb phrases (Smith, 1997). In this study the concept "lexical aspect" is used. Vendler (1967) classified lexical aspect into four classes based on their temporal prosperities; STA, ACT, ACH and ACC.

ACTs are verbs that express an event that "consists of successive phases following each other in time"(Vendler, 1967, p.18). In other words, activities express an action in progressive, in sentence like (Sam is running). Vendler (1967) differentiates ACT (e.g., walk, run, work, etc.) from STA (e.g., know, understand, recognize, etc.), in terms of continuation. STA lack the continuous tense (e.g., *I am knowing, loving, and so forth) while activities possess progressive tense (e.g., I am walking, writing, etc.). STAs, by contrast, lack the feature of continuous tense. STA are expressed by verbs like *know, understand, love, realize and so on*. Some linguistic features can help recognize the statives. ACCs, according to Vendler (1967, p.100), should (have a "climax," which has to be reached if the action is to be what it is claimed to be). Finally, ACH verbs (e.g. reach the top, win a race, and so on), unlike STA, take place at a short and specific time. In other words, they occur instantaneously (Smith, 1991). Furthermore, one can distinguish ACH from ACC and ACT in that ACH lack the feature of progressive tense (Vendlre, 1976). A further explanation about the characteristics of these aspectual categories is given below.

From a semantic point of view, the lexical classes can be grouped according to their inherent semantic features into telic/atelic, static/dynamic and durative/punctual situations or predicates (Comrie, 1976). ACH and ACC verbs, as shown in table 1 below, can be grouped as telic verbs and ACT and STA can be grouped as atelic verbs (Dahl, 1985; Klien, 1994).

Table1.

   Semantic features of aspectual classes (Based on Smith, 1991)

Situation	Telic	Dynamic	Durative	Example
Stative	_	_	+	know, realize
Activity	_	+	+	run, walk
Accomplishment	+	+	+	run a mile, draw a circle
Achievement	+	+	_	win a race , die

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Fifty-four Saudi EFL undergraduate learners took part this cross-sectional study. They were all male students enrolled in the B.A. program of the Department of English Language and Literature, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University in Riyadh. A biographic questionnaire, in the target language, was administered to them to gather information on each person's background: their age, their level, the time spent studying English and being abroad in a place where English is spoken. Their ages range from 19-22 years. All of them had had at least seven years of studying English. They belonged to five levels. The five groups were chosen from L3, L4, L5, L6 and L7 in order to account their proficiency, given the fact that L3 and L4 learners are beginners, L5 and L6 learners are intermediate and L7 learners are advanced.

The tasks of this study were administered to 65 students in the selected different five levels: L3, 13; L4, 13; L5, 12; L6, 13 and L7, 14. However, eleven students were excluded: 9 students did not complete the task, and 2 students had been to a foreign country (the US for 1-3 years) and they answered the task 100 % correct. As a result, the findings of 54 students from different five levels (L3; n=10, L4; n= 10, L5; n=10, L6; n= 11, L7; n=13) were reported and analyzed for the study's instruments.

3.2. Elicitation Tasks and Procedures

Bardovi-Harlig (2000) reviewed different ways of eliciting information on the use of tense and aspect systems; "by observation of talk on a daily basis, conversational interviews, a film retell task, a story retell task, cloze passages, short contextualized passages, judgment tasks and personal and impersonal narratives" (p.15). Information elicitation in this cross-sectional study included two tasks: (1) a production task, a series of cloze passages task and (2) a comprehension task, a grammaticality judgment task (GJT).

3.2.1. Production Task

The production task employed in the study was a cloze task because it is useful to examine learners' use of simple past in an obligatory context (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992). In addition, it facilitates the comparison among the participants based on the same criteria, which otherwise might be less clear. The purpose of the cloze task in this study was to compare the appropriate and inappropriate production of the simple past markers of English with both telic and atelic verbs.

The written series of cloze passages task were adopted from Collins' (1999) study. This task is a revised version of Bardrovi-Harlig and Reynod's (1995) cross sectional study. In this task, 56 of the 82 items focused on the simple past and were distributed across the four lexical aspectual categories of verbs: 14 STA, 14 ACT, 14 ACC and 14 ACH (see Appendix A).

Students were administered this task during one of their sessions of the first semester of the academic year (2019). Each level of the students was administered the task separately during their classes. To perform the cloze task, participants, after reading every single passage of the cloze task, had to provide the correct tense of the given base form according to the context.

3.2.2. Comprehension Task

One of the comprehension tasks that SLA researchers use to assess learners' comprehension of the grammaticality of a certain aspect of structure is Grammaticality judgment task (GJT). Kang (2002) states that a major merit of the use of the GJT tests in SLA studies is "to avoid processing difficulties, such as slips of the tongue, memory, etc., often found in production tasks, grammaticality judgments may be appropriate to tap into the learners' implicit knowledge of the new features." (p.55)

This task targeted some of the past simple verbs of the cloze passages task. Thirty two (32) sentences were given to investigate the comprehension of using the past simple tense with the aspectual classes of verbs (A revised version of the GJT, adopted from Gabiriele, 2005). All the items of this task were derived from the cloze task and targeted the simple past tense. They were also distributed by the lexical aspect: 8 ACH, 8 ACC, 8 STA, and 8 ACT (see Appendix B). Unlike the production task, this task was designed to examine the receptive knowledge rather than the production of the distribution of the simple past marker with the aspectual classes of verbs.

Students were administered this task during another session of the second semester of the academic year (2019). They were given the instructions of how to perform this task. That is,

students were asked first to read each sentence and then decide whether it is grammatical (G) or ungrammatical (U) by circling the letter (G) or (U). The context of the sentence determines whether it is grammatical or ungrammatical. That is, in order for a sentence to be grammatical, the verb + morphology must be well-formed in terms of inflection and also must be appropriate in terms of tense and aspect in conjunction with the context.

3.3. Data Coding and Statistical Analysis

Since the main objective of this study is to examine the influence of the semantic properties of the verbs in the simple past context through the appropriate or inappropriate association of the simple past marking, the ability of the learners to produce the correct or incorrect forms of simple past tense was the dependent variable. When the correct verb forms in past tense were produced correctly, they were coded with number (1). When the forms in past tense were produced incorrectly, they were coded with (0). The independent variable was the learners' level. Thus, when correcting the students' responses, each correct answer receive the form 1 and the incorrect one the form 0.

The next step was to enter the data obtained from the learners into excel sheets for each level. In the excel sheet, the four aspectual classes (STA, ACT, ACC and ACH) were labeled separately in isolated columns. Under each one of these category, the 14 verbs were labeled horizontally. Students' names were coded with numbers form 1 – 13 according to the total number in each level. The total of the correct responses was calculated in a separate column. In the GJT, the aspectual categories were attached with the number 1 (SAT1, ACT1, ACC1 AND ACH1) to differentiate between them and the other categories of the cloze task. Then the same procedures of the cloze task were followed.

To carry out the distributional analysis of the appropriate and inappropriate use of the simple past markings, SPSS 22 for Windows was used. Quantitatively, means, standard deviation, frequency, and percentages were used to analyze the elicited data in order to examine the overall use of the simple past responses, non-simple past responses and the distribution of the simple past across the four aspectual classes by all level learners. A one way ANOVA tests were used to investigate the significant differences among the aspectual classes and the learners' level as well. A post hoc Tukey HSD test was also used to decide where the differences lied either between the four aspectual classes or the learners' levels.

4. Findings

4.1. Findings of the production task

The analysis of the findings of the cloze task consists of two parts: (a) the overall use of simple past in general; (b) the distribution of the past marker by the four aspectual classes and the use of the simple past across the levels of the students.

4.1.1. The Overall Use of the Simple Past in the production

This section discusses the use of the simple past tense in general across the students' levels (L3 - L7). The purpose of this analysis is to gauge the learners' general production ability of the simple past. As Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds (1995) and Collins (2002) did, appropriate responses to the past included target-like (knew, belonged, finished, told) , non-target like attempts, including over-generalized forms of irregulars (telled, knewed, writted) and phonetic misspellings (studyed, singed).

Table 2 illustrates the overall use of the simple past tense by learners across the five levels. It is shown that the simple past tense was used highly by level 7 learners with a percentage of 30.9 %. Level 6 learners used the simple past tense about 6% more than level 5 learners (22.9 % and 17.3 %, respectively). The percentages of the use of the simple paste by Level4 and level3 were close with approximately 1 % difference for level 4 learners. All in all, among the five levels of the learners, it is seen that there is a relative development in the use of the perfective as learners proceed to higher levels.

Table 2.

Distribution of percentage use of simple past by learners in the production task.

Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	% of Total Sum
Level 3	10	6. 50	1.57	14.1%
Level 4	10	6.85	1.50	14.9%
Level 5	10	7.98	2.09	17.3%
Level 6	11	9.60	2.31	22.9%

Level 7	13	10.94	2.33	30.9%
Total	54	8.54	2.60	100.0%

To examine whether the differences between the performances of the learners with regard with their level of proficiency were significant or not, a one way ANOVA test was run. The results obtained from this test indicated that the differences were significant (F = 9.82) and p = .000. Post hock Tukey HSD results revealed that there were significant differences in the use of the simple past between L6 and L7 learners and the other level learners. The use of the simple past tense by L3, L4 and L5 learners were not significant.

4.1.2. Distribution of Simple Past by Lexical Aspect

This section presents the findings of the appropriate use of the simple past marking across the four aspectual categories (STA, ACT, ACC and ACH). First, the means and standard deviations of the use of the simple past by all level learners across STA, ACT, ACC and ACH are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

The distribution of the simple past across the lexical aspect in the production task

| Level		N	STA	ACT	ACC	ACH
Level 3	Mean	10	4.70	5.80	7.40	9.50
	Std. Deviation		1.34	1.81	2.88	2.07
Level 4	Mean	10	4.20	5.50	7.10	9.20
	Std. Deviation		1.03	1.72	1.91	2.44
Level 5	Mean	10	6.40	6.60	9.40	9.50
	Std. Deviation		2.95	2.91	2.413	2.12
Level 6	Mean	11	7.82	8.09	10.55	11.91
	Std. Deviation		3.34	3.42	2.02	1.76
Level 7	Mean	13	10.46	9.31	11.69	12.31
	Std. Deviation		3.09	3.12	2.56	2.08
Total	Mean	54	6.94	7.20	9.39	10.61
	Std. Deviation		3.45	3.02	2.93	2.44
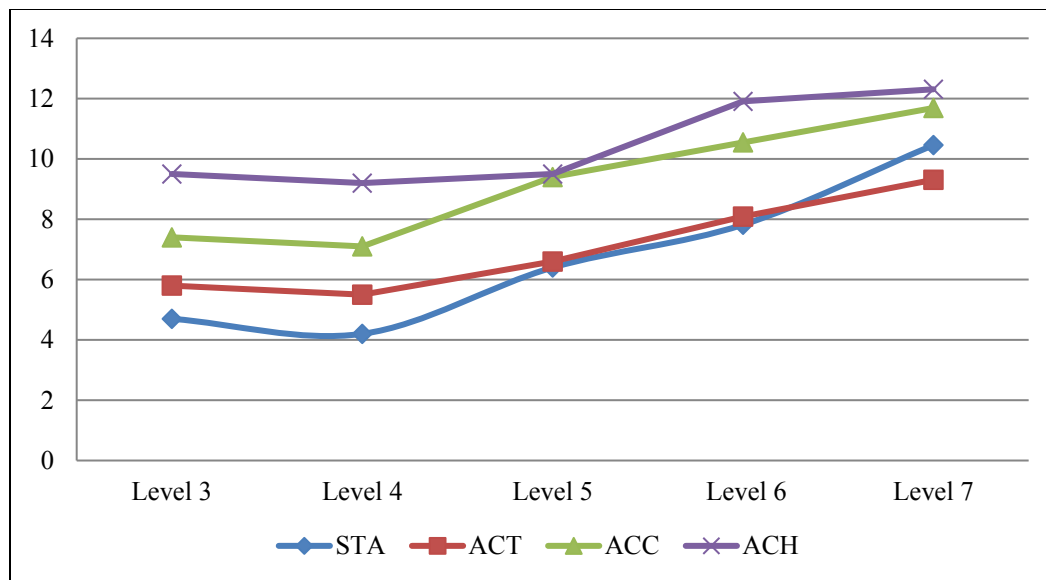
Figure1. The distribution of the simple past across the lexical aspect in the production task

It can be clearly seen from Table 3 and figure1 that all learners in the different five levels attached the past marker most with ACH verbs followed by ACC (with a total mean 10.61 and 9.39, respectively). The use of the simple past with STA and ACT was approximately close (with a total mean 6.94 and 7.20 respectively).

L3 learners used the past marker more with achievements than with accomplishments (9.5 and 7.4 respectively) and they associated the simple past marker more with activity verbs (with a mean of 5.8) than statives (4.7). Similarly, among telics, L4, L5 and L6 learners attached the past marker more with ACH than with ACC, and they also preferred using simple past more with activities than with statives. L7 learners', with regard with telics, performance is similar to the other levels (their use of the simple past with ACH is better than with ACC), but they used the simple past more appropriately with statives than with activities.

In general, it can be clearly seen from the table and graph above that all learners in the different five levels used the simple past more appropriately with telic verbs (ACH and ACC) than with atelic verbs (STA and ACT). More specifically, among telics, the distribution of the simple past marker spread from ACH to ACC in all the learners' levels; among atelics, it spread from ACT to STA.

To examine whether the difference of past marker distribution with telic and atelic verbs is significant or not, a one way ANOVA tests were used. The results of ANOVA indicated that there

was a significant difference in the use of the simple past across the aspectual classes of the verb (STA, ACT, ACC, and ACH verbs) where F (18, 929), p= 0.000 where P < 0.05. To compare the significant difference among STA, ACT, ACC and ACH verbs, a post hoc Tukey HSD test was performed. Tukey test revealed that there was a significant difference in terms of use of the simple past between ACH (P = 0.000), and STA and ACT. Like ACH, there was a significant difference between ACC (P= 0.001) and STA and ACT. However, there was no significant difference between ACH and ACC (P= 0. 147) or between STA and ACT (P= 0. 969 where P > 0.05.

4.2.   Findings of The Comprehension task

4.2.1. The General comprehension of the Simple Past

To examine the overall receptive knowledge of the past marker, the general understanding of the simple past by all learners is analyzed first. As table 4 shows, the simple past was highly preferred by level7, 6 and 5 learners (with a percentage of 23.0%, 22.3 % and 21.3 % respectively). On the other hand, L 4 and L3 learners showed a less preference than the higher levels (with a percentage of 18.3% and 15.1% respectively). Generally speaking, it can be said that high-level learners' receptive knowledge is better than the lower levels.

Table4.

The distribution of the simple past marking across levels in the comprehension task

level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	% of Total Sum
level3	10	4.35	.38	15.1%
level4	10	5.28	.32	18.3%
level5	10	6.13	.76	21.3%
level6	11	6.43	.69	22.3%
level7	13	6.02	1.22	23.0%
Total	54	5.65	1.04	100.0%

When a one way ANOVA test was run, it indicated that there was a significant difference in the choice of the simple past tense by learners' levels, F (12.227), p = 0.000. To discover where these differences lied, post hoc Tukey HSD was performed. The results of this test illustrated that

the simple past tense was used more significantly by level, 5 , 6 and level 7 learners in comparison with level3 learners(p=0.000 for each). The results of Tukey did not reveal a significant difference in the use of the simple past between level 3 and level4 learners (p=0.065). Similarly, the choice of the simple past marker was not significant among level 5, 6 and 7 learners.

4.2.2. The Distribution of Simple Past by Lexical Aspect

As table 5 indicates, unlike the production task, the simple past was highly preferred with ACC followed by ACH (with a mean of 6.61 and 6.12, respectively). Regarding the atelic verbs, it seems that the association of the past marking with STA is more than with ACT (5.08 and 4.78). More precisely, all Level learners attached the simple past marker more with ACC than with ACH except L5 learners: they used the simple past tense more with ACH than with ACC. The distribution of the past marker with atelic verbs varies. L3, L5 and L7 learners attached simple past marker with STA more than with ACT verbs whereas L4 and L6 learners associated it in a similar percentage with both STA and ACT. In short, the distribution of the simple past with telic verbs (ACH and ACC) was more appropriately than with the atelic verbs (ACT and STA). In this task, figure 2 shows that the use of the past marker among telic verbs, unlike the cloze task, spread from ACC to ACH, and among atelic verbs, it spread from STA to ACT.

Table5.

The distribution of the simple past across the lexical aspect in the comprehension task

level		N	STA	ACT	ACC	ACH
Level 3	Mean	10	4.10	3.40	5.00	4.90
	Std. Deviation		.99	.843	1.05	.74
Level 4	Mean	10	4.40	4.40	6.50	5.80
	Std. Deviation		1.58	1.35	.97	.919
Level 5	Mean	10	5.70	5.10	6.80	6.90
	Std. Deviation		1.34	1.66	.79	.876
Level 6	Mean	11	5.27	5.27	7.18	6.36
	Std. Deviation		2.05	1.68	1.25	1.43
Level 7	Mean	13	5.90	5.70	7.50	6.60

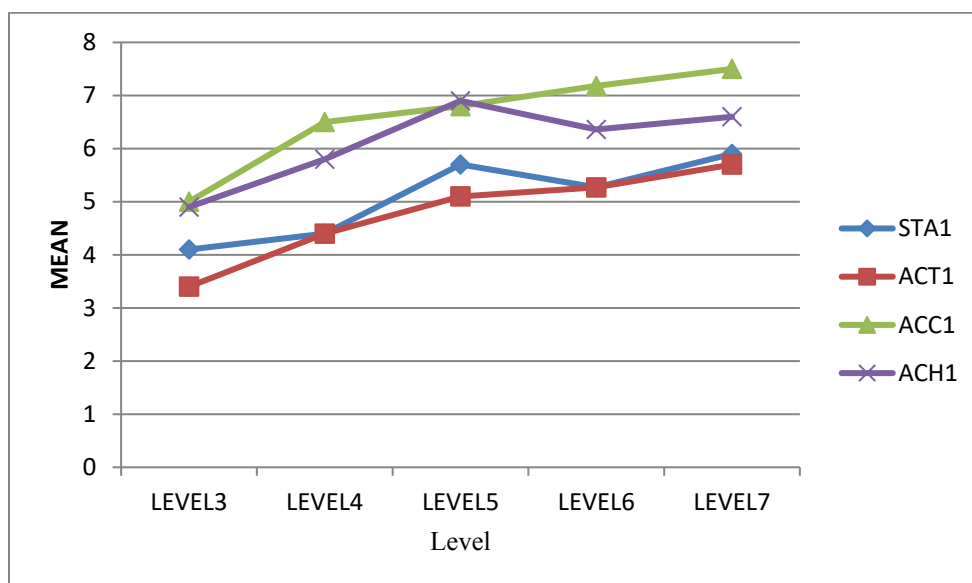|			.74	1.49	.85	1.35
	Std. Deviation					
Total	Mean	54	5.08	4.78	6.61	6.12
	Std. Deviation		1.55	1.60	1.30	1.28

Figure 2. The distribution of the simple past across the lexical aspect in the comprehension task

To examine whether the difference of past marker distribution with telic and atelic verbs was significant or not, a one way ANOVA tests were used. The results of one way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference in the use of the simple past across the aspectual classes of the verb (STA, ACT, ACC, and ACH) where F (18, 178), P = 0.000 where P < 0.05.

To compare the significant difference among statives, activities, accomplishments and achievement verbs, a post hoc Tukey HSD test was performed. Tukey test revealed that there was a significant difference in terms of use of the simple past between achievement (P = 0.002 and P= 0.000), and statives and activities. Like achievement, there was a significant difference between accomplishment (P= 0.000) and statives and activities. However, there was no significant difference between achievement and accomplishment (P= 0. 315) or between statives and activities (P= 0. 731 where P > 0.05).

In sum, according to the results obtained from the comprehension task, it can be said that higher level learners' (L6 and L7) performance in using the simple past was better than the lower

levels. Regarding the association of the simple past marker with the four aspectual classes (ACH, ACC, STA and ACT), findings, in general, revealed that all level learners matched the past marker more appropriately with telics than with atelics. More specifically, the use of the simple past, among telics, spread from ACC to ACH, and it spread from STA to ACT among atelics.

5. Discussion

The first research question asked whether Saudi undergraduate learners of English use the simple past marking more telic or atelic verb. In both tasks (the production and comprehension tasks), Saudi learners marked the simple past morphology significantly more successfully with telics (ACH and ACC) than with atelic verbs (STA and ACT). These findings are consistent with other studies (Andersen and Shiria, 1994, 1996, Bardovi- Harlig and Reynolds, 1995 and Rodh, 1996) which confirm the validity of the AH predictions whereby learners of L2 language tend to associate simple past marking initially with telic verbs and they extend it to atelic verbs. These findings suggest that Saudi learners are influenced by the lexical aspect when acquiring the simple past marking.

The Second research question guided the investigation of the distribution of the past morphology across achievements and accomplishments. The evidence obtained from the this study investigation, including the production task (the cloze task) and the comprehension task (GJT), were of twofold; findings of the cloze task showed that Saudi learners' association of the simple past morphology spread from achievements to accomplishments in which they used the simple past more appropriately with achievements than with accomplishments; on the other hand, results of the GJT revealed that Saudi learners preferred the use of simple past morphology more appropriately with accomplishments than with achievements.

The results of the production task are consistent with the findings of learners from other studies whereby the association of the past marker was more strongly with ACH (Bardovi- Harlig and Bergestron, 1996; Bardovi- Harlig, 1998; Rohde, 1996). Accordingly, the findings of the cloze task are completely in line with the AH predictions in that the use of simple past marking spread from achievements to accomplishments.

Findings obtained from the comprehension task do not follow the principles of the AH in that learners preferred using the simple past with durative telic events (ACC) more successfully than with punctual telic events (ACH). These findings support the evidence of other studies (Slabakova,

2001, 2003; Mun, 2008). Nevertheless, according to the findings of the post hock Tukey in the two tasks, it was found that there were no significant differences between ACH and ACC and in the use of the simple past. These findings suggest that learners in general are more influenced by the semantic telicity of the verbs (the inherent end point) regardless of the punctuality property (ACH) of the verbs.

The third research question was set to test the spread of English past marking among atelics, from ACT to STA verbs as predicted by the AH. The results obtained from the cloze task followed the AH prediction in which Saudi learners' use of simple past marking extended from ACT to STA (although, post-hoc Tucky test found no significant difference between STA and ACT means for the whole sample). A better explanation for these results could be attributed to the overuse of the base and present forms with STA verbs, which is a possible effect of the learners L1 where simple past is not marked overtly. Moreover, the perfective (past) is considered the base form in Arabic so that learners, in particular lower level learners struggled to attach the English past marker.

Findings of the comprehension tasks are not in line with the AH because learners perceived the past stative more appropriately than the past activity. These findings are congruent with other previous cross-sectional studies of English that had found that learners struggle more with ACT verbs rather than STA (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998). In general, findings of this study do not completely support the AH principles in which the sequence of the distribution of the past marking spread from STA to ACT in the comprehension task.

In short, the findings indicated that the lexical aspect had a partial influence on the acquisition of English temporal morphology of the simple past marking by Saudi EFL learners. More specifically, results showed that learners' first choice of using the past marker was with telic verbs then extended to atelic verbs. Among telics, findings are partially in line with the validity of the AH, in which learners' association of the past marker in the comprehension task distributed from ACC to ACH rather than from ACH to ACC. Similarly, learners' use of the simple past marker in the same taks did not follow the predictions of the AH, in which it spread from STA to ACT rather from ACT to STA.

Beside the effect of the lexical aspect, learners' L1 language influence might emerge through the overuse of base and present forms by all learners across the five levels in which they did not mark tense with the past markers because it is marked covertly in Arabic. In the analysis, according to the data obtained from the learners in all the levels, it is clear that there was a higher

percentage of accurate use of simple past associated with learners of higher levels (L6 and L7). However, both lower and higher level students associated the English past marker in the same sequence.

6. Conclusion

The AH states that there is an acquisitional sequence for simple past marker because of the effect of the inherent meanings of the verbs. However, findings of this study revealed that the lexical aspect may not have a primary influence on the L2 acquisition of English past marking. The analysis of the two tasks, the production and comprehension tasks, revealed that the lexical aspect has a partial influence on the English past marking. Learners in the production task marked simple past more with ACH than with ACC, which is consistent with the AH; however, in the comprehension task, learners' comprehension of the past marking spread from ACC to ACH, which is inconsistent with the AH. Among atelic verbs, findings obtained from Saudi learners in both tasks partially agree with the AH principles. In the production task, learners' association of the past marking was more appropriate with ACT verbs than with STA verbs. However, in the comprehension task, it was the other way around, which is not in line with the AH prediction. Thus, according to the analysis of the data of the comprehension and production tasks, it seems that elicitation tasks may play a role in the L2 acquisition of English past morphology. Learners' L1 may be a factor that affect the distribution of the English past markers across the lexical aspect.

7. Pedagogical implications

The findings of this study found that Saudi learners performed differently in the two tasks- the production and comprehension tasks. It was also found that even high level learners kept using incorrect forms in the simple past contexts which suggests that even proficient Saudi learners of English have a difficulty in marking tense in English. These findings suggest that instructors should not be limited to explicit instruction when teaching English forms. Moreover, instructors should be eclectic whereby they ought to use different teaching techniques and strategies that meet the different needs of students. For example, task-based language teaching and communicative approaches are thought to be useful for teaching students how to use the language structures

accurately and appropriately because EFL learners of English need more exposure to the target language (Fontiveros-Malana, 2018).

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Appendix A

Target verbs for simple past context in the cloze passages task

States (14)	Activities (14)	Accomplishments (14)	Achievements (14)
belong	cook	buy	break
enjoy	eat bread	change the story	die
feel	eat in the cafeteria	change apartments	discover
know	go (attend)	give	drop
like	live	go to Paris	drop
look	panic	grow up	explode
look	ride	marry	fall out
need	run	move	find
own	sing	rent a video	finish
seem	stay	ride 10 km	happen
smell	study	run 5 km	kill
taste	swim	swim a km	lose
think	tell stories	tell a story	start
want	work	write	turn of

Appendix B

Target verbs for simple past context in the comprehension task

Statives (8)	Activities (8)	Accomplishments (8)	Achievements (8)
enjoy	cook	change the story	break
feel	go (attend)	give	die
look	live	grow up	discover
need	sing	marry	fall out
own	stay	rent a video	find
seem	study	run 5 km	finish
taste	swim	swim a km	lose
want	work	write	rn off