



EFL Yemeni Undergraduates' Tense Error Resulted Due to L1 Transfer

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Abstract

The present study aims at investigating the influence of Arabic language as a mother tongue language on EFL Yemeni Undergraduates. It targets specifically the errors occurring in past and perfect tenses. The errors mostly occur due to the Arabic mother tongue effect where Arabic language does not include perfect tense; thus, such grammatical errors are to happen. These are negative errors that claim misuse of mother tongue interpretation while using English tenses. Therefore, they are seen unclear sometimes in the target language, i.e., English due to the effect of the mother tongue language. The selected informants are Yemeni EFL Undergraduates. They are carefully selected to study English as their major. The study revealed that there are errors among EFL Yemeni undergraduates' learners using present tense instead of perfect to express perfect tense in English. EFL Yemeni Undergraduates misuse the tense due to the expression produced while interfering the mother tongue effect to express the English sentence.

Key Words: EFL, Arabic Language, Mother Tongue Transfer, Errors.

Introduction

The perfect tenses are one of the most challenging tenses that EFL Yemeni Undergraduates face while learning English. It is considered difficult tenses for both learners to learn and teachers to instruct. The reason of this is resulted because of the fact that Arabic language do not have the same use and structure of the perfect tense and aspect since it does not have an equivalent of this tense in Arabic except those of the completed or non-completed actions. Therefore, EFL Yemeni learners with their Arabic background lack such structure as well as the semantic and pragmatic concept that is mistaken and miscommunicated. They might fall in such errors also due to the lack of the proper practice when used at the classroom by teachers. This causes the improper

adoption of the use of the tense by these young learners. Thus, such errors tend to happen by the EFL learners in the Yemeni context.

According to a study (Lado, 1957; Lightbown & Spada, 2000; Liszka, 2004; Ba-Saeed, 2013), it is shown that there is an important factor that creates a challenge for EFL learners to adequately acquire an L2 that is the L1 interference. Learners at the beginning of learning an L2 depend mostly on their grammatical knowledge they have in mind of their mother tongue. They tend to match the grammatical use of the mother tongue into the L2. This happens when they face the difficulty to express themselves well, so they basically use their mother tongue knowledge reflected to express themselves in the second language. Following such a way might be effective to some aspects, so it is called as 'positive transfer'. Nevertheless, knowing that languages are not similar, learners cannot simply transfer the grammatical rules of their L1 into L2 which mostly results misuse of the tense. This is the case of EFL Yemeni learners. This is how they are seen to follow the use of tenses influenced by their mother tongue; and therefore, misusing the tense. They are mostly substituting the use of past simple tense or past progressive instead of the targeted perfect tense. Matter's (2001) in a study to investigate the writings of Arab learners pointed out that learners tend to avoid using the present perfect tense in English and substitute that with the simple past. Therefore, learners error this tense, for they lack the understanding of the semantic as well as the perfect tense and aspect pragmatic features. This shows that learners are not well aware of the tense use that whether it is past or perfect rather they tend to mix the use of them.

Literature Review

This study is concerned with the errors resulted due to the L1 interference when the use of the perfect tenses in English as second language by EFL Yemeni learners. Errors usually occur by EFL learners have been studied by several L2 researchers. Ellis explained errors as "the deviation from the norms of the target language" (1994, p.51). Therefore, errors make an inconsistent structure with the known norms of the target language, i.e., L2. It is considered as a violation of the L2 norms and uses. For instance, when a learner of L2 omits the past morpheme "...ed" to express a past or perfect tenses, he/she violates the norms and the rules of the second language. Tenfjord et al. (2006); on the other hand, suggested that errors are to be considered as "language usage deviating ways from the way native speakers use the target language" (p. 102). It is clear when the target language is deviated from the way the first speakers of the target language produce it as an utterance or a written form, the usage would not be seen correct. Moreover, Lee (2005) defined a native speaker as a "competent language user" (p.10). But, Cook (1999) suggested the first acquired language of the people puts them as native speakers; while there are other features that are considered incidental to describe how people use language. Therefore, people who never learnt any language in their childhood are not considered to be native speakers of that language. So, when the use of a language contradicts the native speaker's standard usage, it is considered an error.

Moreover, Corder (1981) and Abdulsata (2000) discussed errors that they occur as the by-product of L2 learner's attempts to express their spoken or written language forms with the lack of understanding of the target language system. This is also clear on the case of so many EFL Yemeni and Arab learners. Similarly, Jabeen (2015) defined errors as the deficiency of learning by the learner or the linguistic inadequacy of the learners; besides, errors are mistakes that are not self-corrected. Selinker and Gass (2008) pointed out that errors can be defined as "red flags" that expose weak linguistic knowledge of the L2 learners. Thus, errors are deviations from the rules of the target language while learners are not aware of them. This is how errors can be traced as deviation from the L1 rules of language. On the other side, it is known that the L1 transfer is commonly acknowledged as the source of errors among researchers in such field. Gass (1984) pointed out that in the last few decades, there has been a revival of interest in language interference as one of the mentalist mechanisms that underlie SLA. L1 transfer "refers to the incorporation of L1 into the knowledge system of the L2, which the learner is trying to build" (Ellis, 1994, p. 28). The first language transfer is to have an essential mentalist process in L2 learning. Al-Khwalda, and Alhaisoni (2012) suggested that the L1 transfer refers to the generalization or implementation of the learner's knowledge about their L1 to help them using and comprehending the L2. The EFL Arab learners; for example, are expected to use the simple present tense instead of the present progressive tense because of the difference between the two languages since Arabic does not have the present perfect progressive tense (Zihiri 2010).

Since the paper focuses on the tense errors resulted due to L1 interference, the research will focus on past tenses and perfect tenses to clarify the misused knowledge of Yemeni EFL learners. It specifically focused on the simple past, the past perfect, the present perfect and present perfect progressive. Actually, there are few studies conducted on these examining errors on EFL Yemeni learners especially when the present perfect progressive tense is studied. Different studies have been conducted concerning errors of English verb tenses committed by Arab learners due to L1 transfer. Al-Buainain (2011) conducted a study of EFL Arab learner's errors in writing and explored that there is a misunderstanding of time frame of the English language by Arabic speakers. Furthermore, EFL Arabic learners sometimes do not use the perfect tenses correctly in general. Zhiri (2014); besides this, studied tense errors made by Arab EFL learners and explored that some students are not able to translate the present perfect progressive. The present perfect progressive is of common problem to most of Arab EFL learners. About 20% of the total errors EFL Arab learners committed was in this tense. Therefore, Zhiri concluded that EFL Arab learners have difficulty to combine the present perfect into progressive tenses, and also face a difficulty to use the perfective aspects to produce the present perfect progressive tense. So, they use present simple instead repeatedly.

Objectives

- 1- To investigate the understanding of EFL Yemeni learners of the English tenses.
- 2- To examine the levels of understanding among Yemeni learners.
- 3- To explore the influence of Arabic language as L1 and its transfer.
- 4- To highlight the L1 interference when using English tenses by EFL Yemeni learners.

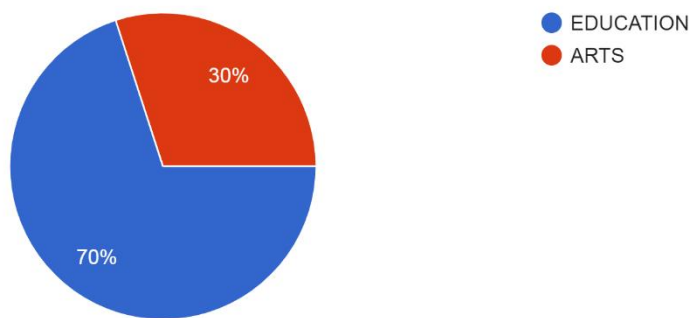
Research Questions

- 1- How often EFL Yemeni learners commit errors due to L1 transfer influenced by Arabic language?
- 2- How do EFL understand the past and perfect tenses; and therefore, commit errors in them?
- 3- What types of errors usually occur by EFL Yemeni learners when using the discussed English tenses?
- 4- How do EFL Yemeni learners get influenced by the L1 transfer?

Research Participants

The current study has been conducted involving 20 undergraduate students whose academic major is English. They are all aged between 18-25 years old. They were mixed participants of males and females as the university educational system in Yemen in a coeducational system. The informants are all selected in the departments of English, faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education, in Hodeidah University. About 70% of the participants were from the department of English, faculty of Education, while 30% of the participants are from department of English, faculty of Arts.

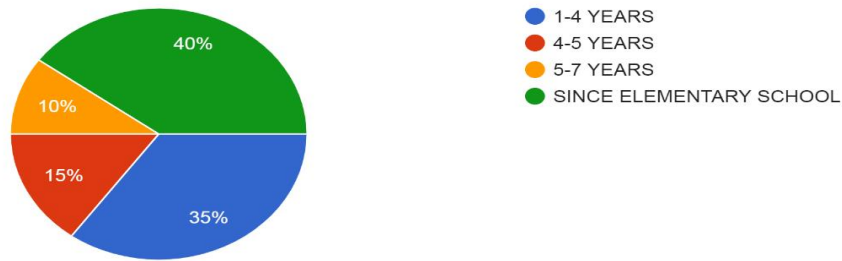
FACULTY OF
20 responses



They are ranged from level one to level four as the university system in Yemen for bachelor students is four years. An official approval for conducting the study was granted to collect the data. The students were voluntarily participating. They got a google form link of the study. The students' acquaintance with English differs from one student to another as there are some students who are acquainted with English since elementary school and others are connected with English at the University level only. The following chart explains the participants acquaintance with English.

HOW LONG HAVE BEEN STUDYING ENGLISH?

20 responses



About 40% of the participants have been studying English since elementary school. 35% of the participants have been studying English for about four years. 15% of the participants study English for five years while 10% have studying English for seven years. So, based on this the least per cent of the acquaintance of the participants with English is four years and the maximum is those who have been studying English since elementary school. However, Yemeni students study English in school for six years and this period is not considered in the research since school learning of English is usually not given a real significance while those studying English since elementary school are those graduated from private schools whose medium is English. This is also can be viewed as an illustration of the EFL Yemeni learners' levels with English in general. Free translation tasks were given to the participants to translate and to examine the way L1 transfer may happen.

Instrument and Procedures

11 Arabic sentences were given to the participants to translate into English. A google form link was provided for the participants to answer the experimental test of the free translation since the study is conducted online. The sentences were in the formal Arabic language since Arabic is the official language used in all educational systems in Yemen. The sentences involved were sentences related to past simple tense, past perfect progressive, present perfect tense, and present simple. Each sentence in the translation task refers to a tense, and others two tenses like the mix between the past simple and past perfect tenses. There is no sequential order for the sentences. The tasks examine the use of the tenses once they are expressed into English, for every Arabic sentence in the task is equivalent to a specific tense in the study. The Arabic sentences were given to be translated to their similar counterparts/equivalents in the English tenses. For example, the past perfect tense was provided within an appropriate context that explained that there are two actions happening and one of them occurred before the other. (See the experimental test that is provided in the appendix A)

Study and Discussion

The study examined the L1 transfer in EFL Undergraduates’ Yemeni learners through the tasks provided in the experimental test. The participants were asked to express them in English freely Arabic sentences targeting both past tense and perfect tenses. The tasks provided for the participants are 11 while the participants are 20. The results varied, yet showed the L1 transfer influence on EFL Yemeni learners. Some participants have not shown any awareness of the tense used while expressing the sentences in English while others showed some awareness. This illustrated the way L1, being Arabic, influenced the students’ performance in understanding the tenses. For example, the chart below shows the result of the students translating a past perfect tense sentence. The sentence is illustrated below with the chart:

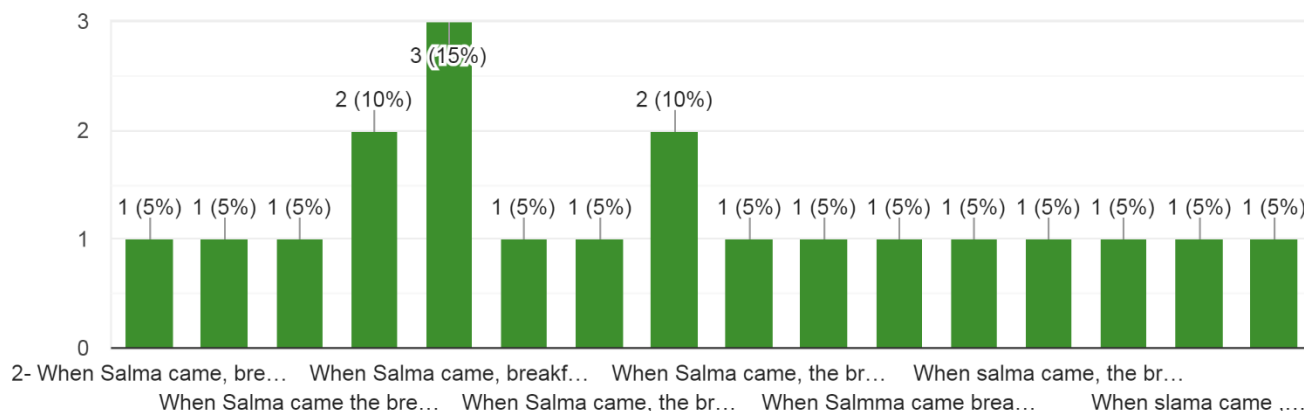
عندما جاءت سلمى كان الفطور جاهزا.

Endama ja?t Salma kana alfatooru jahezan.

When Salma came, the breakfast has already ready.

عندما جاءت سلمى كان الفطور جاهزا -2

20 responses



The sentence provided above for translation is a past perfect tense sentence provided in a context with a past simple sentence. It is seen that 18 participants answered expressed the sentence as “When Salma came, the breakfast was ready” while two participants expressed the tense perfectly as “When Salma came, the breakfast had already been ready”. It is shown here how the participants perfectly expressed the past simple tense in the 20 responses while the past perfect tense has been well expressed by only two participants. It shows a very low per cent as those who are well equipped with the understanding of the past perfect tense. The other example with the past perfect tense is similar to the result of the first. The sentence expressed as “When we came to school, the part had already started an hour ago.”.

ذهبنا للمدرسة وكان الحفل قد بدأ قبل ساعة من وصولنا.

ðahabna li almadrasati wa kana alħafllu qad bada? qabla saħh men wusʻolena.

When we came to school, the party had already started an hour ago.

For this example, 2 participants truly expressed the sentence in both tenses past simple tense and past perfect tense while 17 participants expressed the sentence with past simple tense only for both sentences while one participant used present perfect tense instead of the past perfect where the response was as “when we came to school, the party has already started.”. Thus, it is shown with the examples above how EFL Yemeni participants fail mostly to truly express the perfect tense while when it comes to past simple, they easily deal with it since they do not have any difference to express the past tense in their L1. This is seen clear in the examples discussed above. Similarly, the errors occur with the past perfect tense examples provided in the tasks. The study also examined the students’/participants’ ability to deal with present perfect tense where the results can be discussed as 18 participants used present simple tense instead of the present perfect. The sentence is exemplified below as:

لدي الكثير من الذكريات الجميلة في الحديدة.

Ladya alkaθeer men aðekryat alzameelah fi Al-Hodeidah.

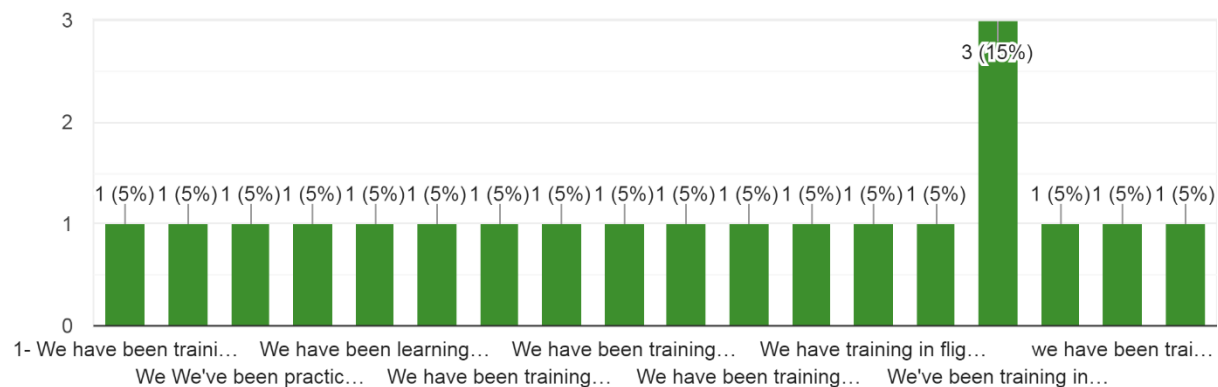
I have got a lot of good memories in Hodeidah.

The sentence is expressed truly in present perfect “I have got a lot of good memories in Hodeidah.”; 2 participants truly expressed the present perfect in such a way while others used present simple tense to express it making it; “I have a lot of good memories in Hodeidah.”. The L1 influence affected the use of the present perfect clearly in the participants’ responses. The 18 responses using present simple tense instead of the present perfect explain the L1 transfer of Arabic into English since Arabic native speakers do not have a present perfect structure to be expressed rather in such cases of using a perfect tense Arabic speaker use past simple or present simple.

The discussion above explains clearly how the tenses are expressed by the EFL Yemeni undergraduates making errors in the perfect tenses due to the L1 transfer that affect their production of the English tenses. The reason behind is that the perfect tense is not used or structured in Arabic language. Therefore, EFL Yemeni learners of English as second language find it mostly difficult to cope with such tenses. The way L1, being Arabic, affects EFL Yemeni learners marks a clear illustration for the way how L1 transfer causes errors due to L1 interference. This is the case most to happen with so many learners of English whose mother tongue is Arabic, and it is clear that they get affected as a result matching one-to-one tenses of both languages of the source and target languages. Therefore, the learning of any language as a second language should keep in mind the L1 transfer affecting the EFL learners of the language.

نحن نتدرب في مكتب الطيران منذ شهر -1

20 responses



There is a good number of the participants who truly responded using the present perfect progressive tense. This is shown on the chart. Arabic, even though, does not structure such a tense, the expression of the tense when it is confined to a specific period makes the participants aware of the use of the tense. Thus, the use of the present perfect progressive becomes familiar to them. The L1 transfer with the EFL Yemeni undergraduates is clearly unattained in this form. This is the case of the EFL Yemeni learners as the study has been conducted to examine them. It is clear here that the participants are highly influenced by the L1 transfer when they learn English. The study clarified the case and explained the transfer on the participants in four specific tenses being; present simple tense, present perfect tense, present perfect progressive and past simple tense. The study is clear with the illustration of the examples and the participants' responses enriched the study to clarify the L1 transfer on the participants. This is how the EFL Yemeni undergraduates are influenced with the Arabic as L1. The findings below conclude the study and clarify the ideas resulted and found through the experimental test of the study.

Conclusion and Findings

As the study examined the EFL Yemeni Undergraduates' tense errors resulted due to L1, being Arabic, transfer, it is clear to have found that there have been some errors that EFL Yemeni learners come through once using the tenses discussed in the study, specifically the past perfect tense, present perfect tense, and the past simple tense. The study based on the discussion above found that the understanding of EFL Yemeni learners of the English tenses lacks the sound use of the tense in English as a target language; the influence of Arabic as an L1 is deep and unconscious. This is also clear when the participants expressed well the past simple tense since it matches the use of the past tense in Arabic as their source language and L1. The levels of the students do not differ much since it is seen mostly with the participants expressing the past perfect tense only two could successfully match the true use of the tense while most of the participants used past simple instead of the past perfect tense. There is a big gap between those well equipped with the knowledge of the true use of the tenses

in English and those who fail to express the right use because of the L1 transfer. The influence/transfer appears clear in the study and the misuse of the tense illustrates the errors.

Most often the EFL Yemeni learners, based on the big number of the participants who fail to use the right tense, commit errors due to L1 influenced by the Arabic language grammar. They are found to have a real problem in understanding the target language tenses; hence, errors are to be committed. The errors are most of the time found in the way of one-to-one matching of tenses between the target and source languages grammatical rules. The participants do not give much care for the sound use of the tense rather simple matching of the tenses is to happen; and therefore, errors occur. This is how the errors occur, and this is how they can be examined.

In conclusion, the current study is an attempt to provide a keen view towards the errors that EFL Yemeni learners are most likely to commit in their process of learning English as a second language. It is the process that they get influenced by their L1 grammatical use; and therefore, they get deviated of the true use of the target language grammar. Accordingly, the study explored the negative L1 transfer which is truly influential on EFL Yemeni learners. So, the result of the study here demonstrated that most errors committed by EFL Yemeni learners are to happen with the perfect tenses. This is how it is very challenging for the EFL Yemeni learners to get acquainted with the tenses in the target language without being influenced by their L1. The study; thus, shows that L1 transfer forms an obstacle in learning the perfect tenses and its use in the L2. It is clear that the EFL Yemeni undergraduates confuse the two tenses, i.e., the past perfect tense and past simple tense; similarly, they have the same problem with the present perfect and the present simple tenses. However, these errors once discussed and examined illustrate the linguistic progress of the EFL Yemeni undergraduates and how they can elevate their levels. Knowing and understanding the problems guide us to know how to solve the issue. Thus, the study titled “EFL Yemeni Undergraduates’ Tense Error Resulted Due to L1 Transfer” can be discussed and explored in details.

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Appendix A

An Experimental Test of English Tenses and Mother Tongue Interference.

Dear Students,

Here is an experimental test that is going to evaluate the errors that EFL Yemeni learners of English language usually fell in when using and learning English tenses.

I hereby confirm that the information needed and is going to be taken is only for the research purpose.

Thanking you,

Yours Sincerely,

Afraah Ali Mohammed Hazza'a.

Section One:

Participant Details.

Name:

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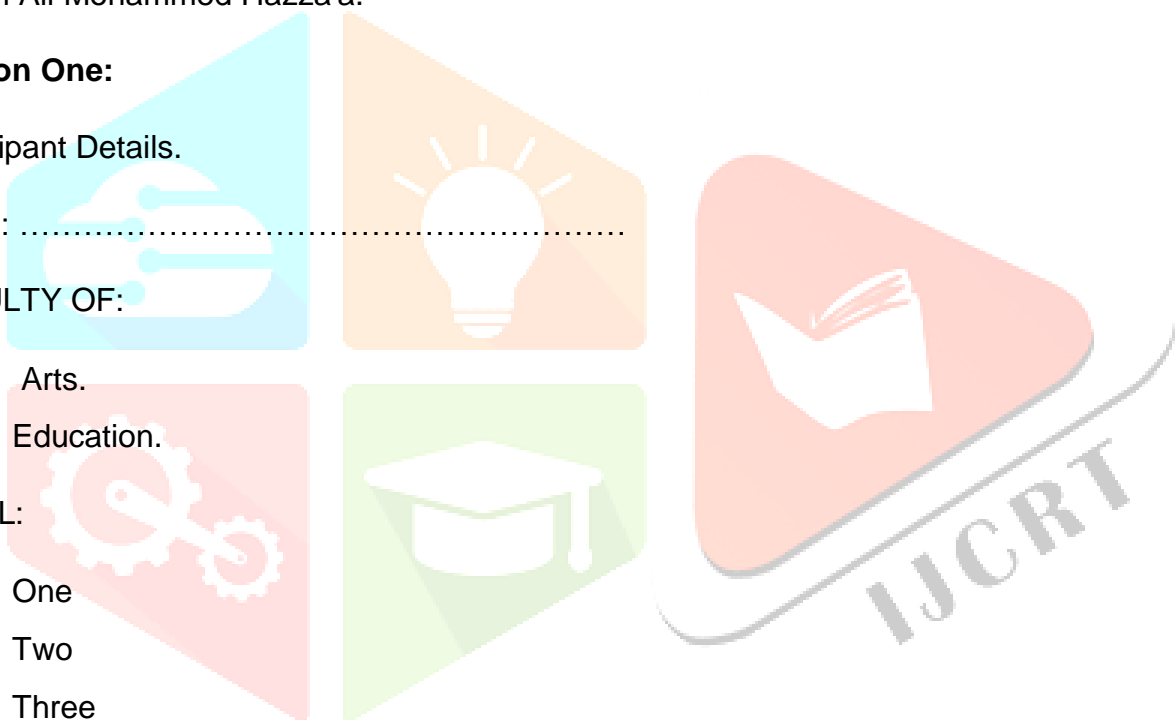
- Arts.
- Education.

LEVEL:

- One
- Two
- Three
- Four

HOW LONG HAVE BEEN STUDYING ENGLISH?

- 1-4 Years.
- 4-5 Years.
- 5-7 Years.
- Since elementary school.



Section Two:**The Test**

- Translate the following sentences into English.

1- نحن نتدرب في مكتب الطيران منذ شهر.

Naħnu natadrabu fi maktabi at'ayan munðu jah.

We have been training in the flight agency since a month.

.....

2- عندما جاءت سلمى كان الفطور جاهزا.

Endama ja?t Salma kana alfat'ooru jahezan.

When Salma came, the breakfast has already ready.

.....

3- ذهبنا للمدرسة وكان الحفل قد بدأ قبل ساعة من وصولنا.

ðahabna li almadrasati wa kana alħafu qad bada? qabla saħh men wus'olena.

When we came to school, the party had already started an hour ago.

.....

4- عاشت امي في صنعاء لمدة عامين قبل ان تتزوج ابي.

ħafat umi fi šana? lemudat ħamein qabla an tatazwaj ?bi.

My mother had lived in Sana'a for two years before she got married to my dad.

.....

5- عشنا في صنعاء لمدة عامين.

ħeħna fi šana? lemudat ħamein.

We have lived in Sana'a for two years.

.....

6- نعيش في صنعاء منذ عامين.

Nħeħu fi šana? munðu ħamein.

We have lived in Sana'a since two years.

.....

7- احب صنعاء كثيرا.

Ohebu šana? kaħiran.

I love Sana'a so much.

.....

8- منذ ان جئت الى صنعاء احب التجول فيها.

Munðu an zeatu ela šana? ohebu attazūla fiha.
Since I have come to Sana'a, I love walking around.

9- غادرت الحديدة قبل عامين.

yadartu Al-Hodeidah Qabla Aamein.
I left Hodeidah two years ago.

10- لدي الكثير من الذكريات الجميلة في الحديدة.

Ladya alkaθeer men aθekryat alzameelah fi Al-Hodeiadah.
I have got a lot of good memories in Hodeidah.

11- عمي عاش في صنعاء لمدة عام قبل مجئنا الى صنعاء.

Œmi Œasha fi šana? Li mudati Œam qabla mažeena ela šana?
My uncle had lived for two years before we came to Sana'a.

