

A Linguistic Investigation of Competency in Tense Categories among Omani EFL Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the competency levels in tense categories among Omani EFL students at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Salalah. The sample included 120 students: 30 students from each level, covering the four levels of the General Foundation Program (GFP). A quantitative research approach was employed, whereby descriptive statistics and t-tests were carried out. It was revealed that the level of competency for levels one and two in tense categories is low. The t-value for the total score of level one is (6.83, $P < 0.05$) with a real mean (5.96) which is significant at a level of 0.05. As for students in level two, they have a total score (3.27, $P < 0.05$) with a real mean (7.40) which is significant at a level of 0.5. On the other hand, the level of competency for level three students is at a moderate point. The t-value for the total score (0.45, $P > 0.01$) is not significant compared to the real mean (8.80). Unlike all other foundation (GFP) levels, level four students obtained the highest level of competency in tense categories with a t-value (4.96, $P < 0.05$) which is significant at the level of 0.5, and the real mean (12.03) is higher than the assumed mean (9). Furthermore, the t-test values are not significant ($P > 0.05$), thereby confirming that no significant difference exists in precision in the level of competency in tense categories among male and female students. Finally, the future tense category proved to be the most challenging one.

1. INTRODUCTION

Arabic and English vary in many aspects of their structures. Tense is one of these aspects. In Arabic, the aspectual system appears to be more dominant than that of tense. Unlike Arabic, English tends to function as a tense language (Ryding, 2005). In this regard, Comrie (1976) declares that tense "locates situation in time, whereas aspect is concerned with the internal temporal constituency of the situation" (pp. 3–4). He adds that aspects act in "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (pp. 3–4). In that regard, the aspect concerns itself with the situation at hand, whether it is completed or still in progress, etc., and symbolizes the opposition of perfective versus imperfective. This difference between the two languages' tense systems may lead to numerous learning obstacles for Omani learners in particular and Arab learners in general in learning English tense categories. Additionally, Mukattash (1983) states that Arab learners of the English language are challenged by several linguistic issues. First, they have a fundamental problem with how to intellectualize the use of English tenses, how to comprehend the action of the verbs, and how to use verb conjunctions. As a result, they cannot speak fluently for an extended period of time. Second, they cannot achieve the ability to master the English language at desired levels of fluency, inside or outside the classroom, thus indicating that the difficulty is associated with students' lack of communicative skills. Furthermore, numerous researchers have indicated that the tense system and its categories cause many problems for Arab learners to learn due to their difficulty in writing or speaking them appropriately (Mudhsh et al., 2021; Shafran, 2019; Mudhsh, 2018; Mohammed, 2008; Mattar, 2003).

Based on the discussion above, this study aims to investigate the level of competency in tense categories among Omani EFL students at the English Language Unit, UTAS-Salalah. It is fervently hoped that the results of this study will be noticed, remarked upon, and eventually regarded as an essential contribution to the efforts outlined in the Oman Vision 2040, looking to develop the linguistic capabilities of Omani learners and ensure their future prosperity. This study hopes to be employed as an essential contribution to the efforts outlined in the Oman Vision 2040, looking to develop the linguistic capabilities of Omani learners and ensure their future prosperity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The word 'tense' is derived from the Latin word 'tempus', which means 'time' (Tipping, 1972). According to Comrie (1976), 'tense' indicates the temporal placement of a situation, whereas 'aspect' focuses on the internal temporal features of that situation. Other linguistic scholars and researchers have highlighted the importance of analyzing errors committed by second- and foreign-language learners. These experts assert that various frameworks and principles can be

used to explain and analyze such errors, which are typically the result of interference from the learner's native language (L1) or cross-linguistic transfer (Jomaa & Bidin, 2017; Jomaa & Dersevi, 2022).

Studies that have focused on Arab learners' use of tenses are varied. For instance, Al-Zahrani (1993) analyzed the English copula omission by Arab learners at the University of South Carolina. The study included 36 Arabic students enrolled in an English program for international students. The findings demonstrated that Arab learners of English experience several difficulties with tenses. Notably, the students omitted the English copula of the present tense more frequently than other tenses, with 69.4% omitting the copula and 30.6% retaining it. In contrast, 22.6% of the students omitted the copula for the past and future tenses. The study concluded that the frequent omission of the English copula of the present tense was likely due to the negative transfer of language from the students' native language, namely Arabic. In addition, the findings imply that the less common omission of the copula of past and future tenses was likely attributed to the positive transfer of language from the students' Arabic language.

In another study, Khalil and Abdallah (2015) investigated the grammatical errors in the writings of 100 EFL Omani students at Nizwa University. The findings showed 2709 grammatical errors across different linguistic aspects. Students' errors in tenses, which made up 37.7% of the total errors, were the most frequently committed category of errors after sorting and categorization into major categories and subcategories. Alternative errors were seen in other sub-categories, such as prepositions and articles.

Matter (2001) argues that Arab EFL learners studying English as a Foreign Language often tend to avoid using the present perfect tense. According to Matter, this avoidance is not due to the differences between Arabic and English tense systems. Rather, it could be attributed to their inability to find the appropriate form of tense and aspect relations within their existing internal capabilities of parsing English sentences in general. Another study by Mattar (2003) suggested that the differences between Arabic and English verb systems can impede Arab learners of English from using certain tenses in their speaking and writing, thereby causing them difficulty in attaining a good understanding and competency in English tenses.

Most recently, Mudhsh et al. (2021) analyzed English tense categories among 120 Yemeni EFL students enrolled in the English department across four levels. The analysis of these results revealed significant differences in the use of the categories of English tenses across the four levels. The results also showed that levels one and two committed the highest number of errors in the three tense categories. Additionally, the future tense received the lowest number of

correct answers compared to the other tenses, thus indicating the negative influence of students' mother tongues, as stated in other studies.

To conclude, numerous studies have examined and identified different types of errors committed by both Arab and non-Arab learners of English. These studies have attributed such errors to the interference of the learners' first language or the negative transfer of the L1 (Mudhsh & Laskar, 2021; Mudhsh, 2018; Zhang & Liu, 2016; Al-Khreisheh, 2015; Tiittanen, 2013; Collins, 2002). This study may help instructors understand the obstacles to learning English tense categories, with a concentration on the General Foundation Program EFL students at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Salalah, Sultanate of Oman.

2.1 Research Objectives

The majority of EFL students in the Sultanate of Oman continue to struggle with English, much as do native students to other Arabic speaking countries. From elementary to the twelfth grades, English is taught as a foreign language in Oman's public schools. More specifically, English writing is quite challenging for Omani students. Their writing contains several errors, particularly in the English tense categories. Based on the discussions and research gaps identified, this study addresses the following research objectives:

1. To investigate the level of competency in tense categories among the four levels of Omani EFL students.
2. To identify the most challenging tense category for the four levels of Omani EFL students.
3. To find out the statistical differences among the levels and gender in tense categories of competencies.
4. To gain insights into whether the students' mother tongue plays a positive or negative role in their tenses competency.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A quantitative research approach was utilized, whereby descriptive statistics were used to show the standard deviation, mean, and t-value. Also, the t-test was applied to illustrate the comparison between the means of the variable groups since it is being used as a common element in the arts and social sciences in general. Descriptive research involves the prolonged in-depth examination of a single phenomenon or problem through the collection and analysis of data, with the ultimate goal of drawing broad conclusions about the nature of the issue at hand and suggesting ways to improve it.

3.1. Research Sample

As the level and gender of the students are used to stratify the study population, a stratified random sampling strategy was conceived as the most effective way of reflecting all the

population's different layers and degrees of complexity. It is an acceptable sampling approach especially under these circumstances. The research sample consisted of 120 students, 30 students (15 males and 15 females) for each level, which covers the four levels of the General Foundation Program (GFP) in the English Language Unit at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Salalah, Oman. Table 1 presents the distribution of the sample of the research according to gender and the level of the student.

Table 1 Research Sample

Variables	Male	Female	Total
Level 1	15	15	30
Level 2	15	15	30
Level 3	15	15	30
Level 4	15	15	30
Total	60	60	120

3.2. Research Instrument

To assist in achieving the desired responses to the research questions of the study, the researchers constructed a competency test consisting of 18 questions (multiple choice), equally composed of 6 questions for each tense. The English Language Unit at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Salalah teaches English tenses based on traditional English grammar to its students. For the students' convenience and comprehension, these tenses were selected for use in the current study. Three categories of English tenses were taken into consideration, i.e. "simple present tense, simple past tense, and future tense".

3.3. Validity of the Tool

To assess the content validity of the research tool, the competency test was sent to six experts in the English language and two statisticians. A conscientious effort was made to set a threshold of 80% agreement with these experts' opinions as the standard for including or deleting the questions. The final outcome of this process was that 18 multiple-choice questions were accepted, with 6 questions equally representing each of the three tenses.

3.4. Reliability of the Tool

According to Cronbach (2004), an instrument's dependability may be defined as its correlation with itself. The dependability of the research instrument was calculated using Alpha Cronbach. Table 2 describes the result:

Table 2: Cronbach Coefficient for Reliability

		Cronbach value
Simple present tense		0.82
Simple past tense		0.70
Simple future tense		0.75
All the tests		0.86

It is evident in Table 2 that Cronbach values are high. Thus, the tool of research has good reliability according to Cronbach Coefficients.

4. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Table 3 explains the data collected from students in level one in relation to the three tense categories. A one-sample t-test (comparing the sample mean with the assumed mean) is a common tool in inferential statistics to identify the level of competency of level one in the three tense categories. Table 3 describes the result of the t-test for one sample.

Table 3. Result of t-test for a Single Sample One Sample for Level One

Level 1	N	Real mean	Expected mean	S. d.	D. f.	T	Sig.	Decision
Present	30	2.06	3	1.048	29	4.87	0.00	Low
Past	30	1.60	3	1.101	29	6.96	0.00	Low
Future	30	2.30	3	1.29	29	2.97	0.00	Low
Sum	30	5.96	9	2.43	29	6.83	0.006	Low

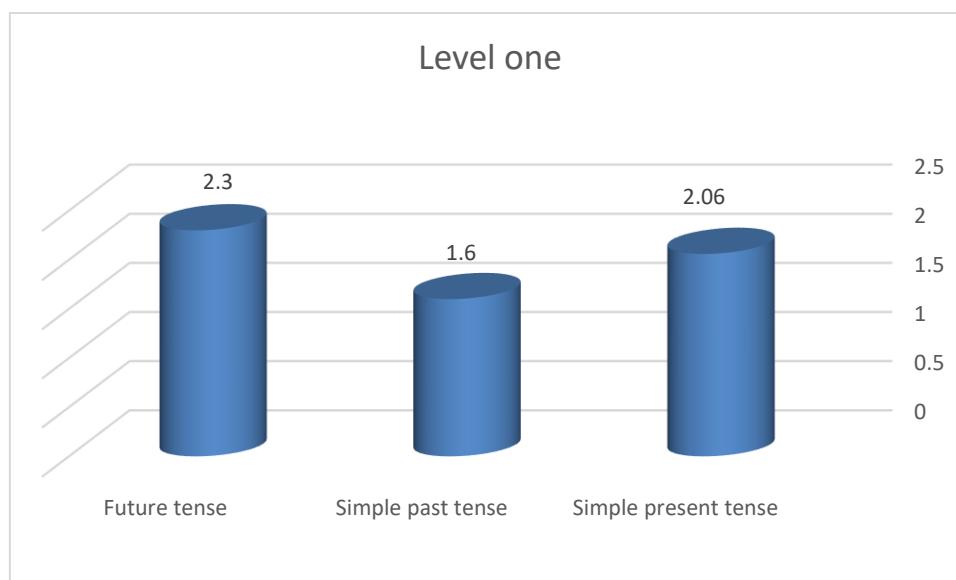


Figure 1 Tense Categories by Students in Level One

Table 3 and Figure 1 depict that the t-value for the total score (6.83, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05) and the real mean (5.96) is lower than the assumed mean (9) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 18 questions = 9). This confirms that the competency level of the students is low. The t-value for simple present tense (4.87, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05) (0.05) level, and the real mean (2.06) is lower than the assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the competency level of the students in the present sample tense is low. The t-value for the simple past tense (6.96, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05) (0.05) level, and the real mean (1.60) is lower than the assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students in the simple past tense is low. The t-value for future tense (2.79, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05), and the real mean (2.30) is lower than the assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of competency of the students in future tense is low. These results are in agreement with a study that was conducted by Mudhsh et al. (2021), which showed that at levels one and two, students had the lowest achievements in the three tense categories. Furthermore, these results are in line with the results by Khalil and Abdallah (2015), which confirmed that Omani EFL students struggle to learn English tense categories, particularly in levels one and two.

Table 4 below clarifies the data collected from level two students on the three tense categories. To determine level two competence in the three tenses, the researchers employed the t-test for a single sample (sample mean and assumed mean) from inferential statistics. Table 4 describes the result of the t-test for one sample.

Table 4 Result of t-test for One Sample for Level Two

Level 2	N	Real mean	Expected mean	S. d.	D. f.	T	Sig.	Decision
Present	30	2.30	3	1.18	29	3.42	0.002	Low
Past	30	3.06	3	1.61	29	0.22	0.823	Middle
Future	30	2.03	3	1.12	29	4.69	0.000	Low
Sum	30	7.40	9	2.67	29	3.27	0.003	Low

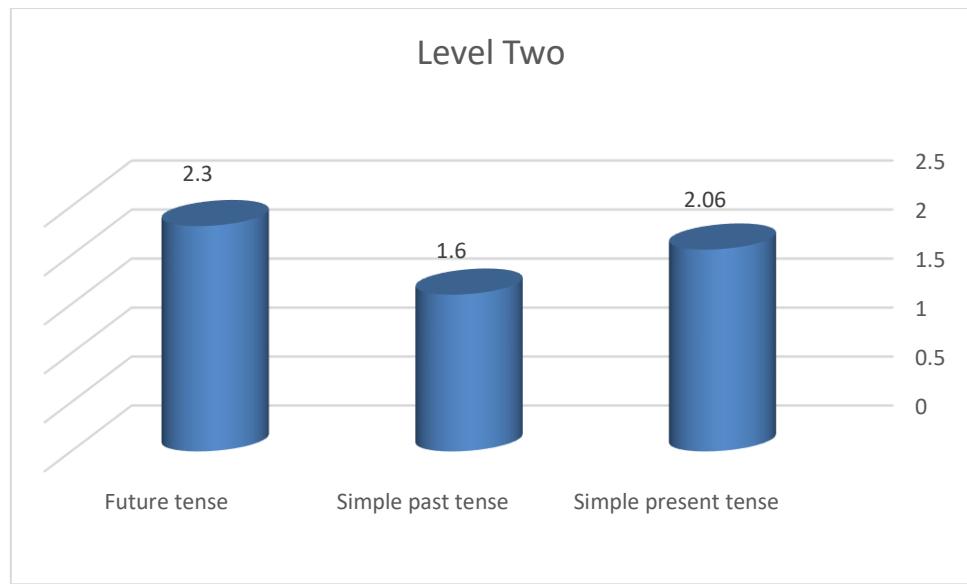


Figure 2 Tense Categories for Students in Level Two

Table 4 and Figure 2 depict that the t-value for the total score (3.27, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05) and the real mean (7.40) is lower than the assumed mean (9) (where the assumed mean = middle degree of 18 questions = 9) which confirms that the level of competency of the students is low. The t-value for the simple present tense (3.42, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05), as are the real mean (2.30) and assumed mean (3) (where the assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students in the simple present tense is low. The t-value for the past simple (0.22, $P > 0.01$) is not significant; there is no meaningful difference between the real mean (3.06) and assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3) which confirms that the level of the students in the past simple tense is middle. This is perhaps due to the similarities in past tense structures between Arabic and English. The t-value for future tense (4.69, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05), and the real mean (2.03) is lower than the assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students in future tense is low. It is assumed that Arab EFL students in levels one and two, when answering English tenses, use their Arabic tense system. This assumption is consistent with the results of other earlier research that asserted that errors made by English EFL learners are due to "interference" or transfer from the L1. In other words, L1 impact contributes to the acquisition of tense categories either positively or negatively (Mudhsh, 2018; Zhang & Liu, 2016; Tiittanen, 2013; Matter, 2003; Collins, 2002).

Table 5 below demonstrates the data collected from level three students on the three tense categories. The one-sample t-test for inferential statistics (sample mean and presumed mean) was used to determine the level of competency of level three in the three tense categories. Table 5 describes the result of the t-test for one sample.

Table 5 Result of t-test for One Sample for Level Three

Level 3	N	Real mean	Expected mean	S. d.	D. f.	T	Sig.	Decision
Present	30	2.43	3	1.590	29	1.95	0.06	Middle
Past	30	3.70	3	1.441	29	2.65	0.01	High
Future	30	2.66	3	1.212	29	1.50	0.14	Middle
Sum	30	8.80	9	2.42	29	0.45	0.65	Middle

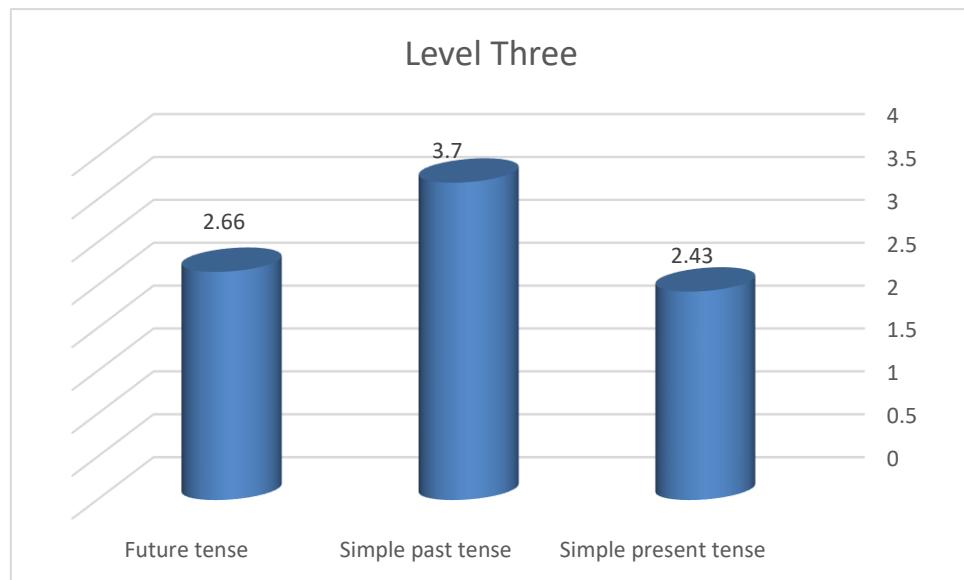
**Figure 3 Tense Categories for Students in Level Three**

Table 5 and Figure 3 clearly show that the t-value for the total score (0.45, $P > 0.01$) is not significant, thus no difference exists between the real mean (8.80) and assumed mean (9) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 18 questions = 6), which confirms that the level of the students is middle. The t-value for the present sample (1.95, $P > 0.01$) is not significant; therefore, no difference exists between the real mean (2.43) and assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students is middle. The t-value for past simple tense (2.65, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05), and the real mean (3.06) is higher than the assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students in the past simple tense is high. The t-value for future tense (1.50, $P > 0.01$) is not significant, thus implying no difference between the real mean (2.66) and assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students is middle. Based on Table 5, level three students achieved a degree of improvement compared with those in level two.

Table 6 below shows the data collected from level four students on the three tense categories. The inferential statistics t-test for a single sample (sample mean and presumed mean) was used to determine level four students' competency in the three tense categories.

Table 6 Result of t-test for One Sample for Level Four

Level 4	N	Real mean	Expected mean	S. d.	D. f.	T	Sig.	Decision
Present	30	4.13	3	1.52	29	4.07	0.00	High
Past	30	4.76	3	1.52	29	6.34	0.00	High
Future	30	3.13	3	1.16	29	2.62	0.00	High
Sum	30	12.03	9	3.34	29	4.96	0.00	High

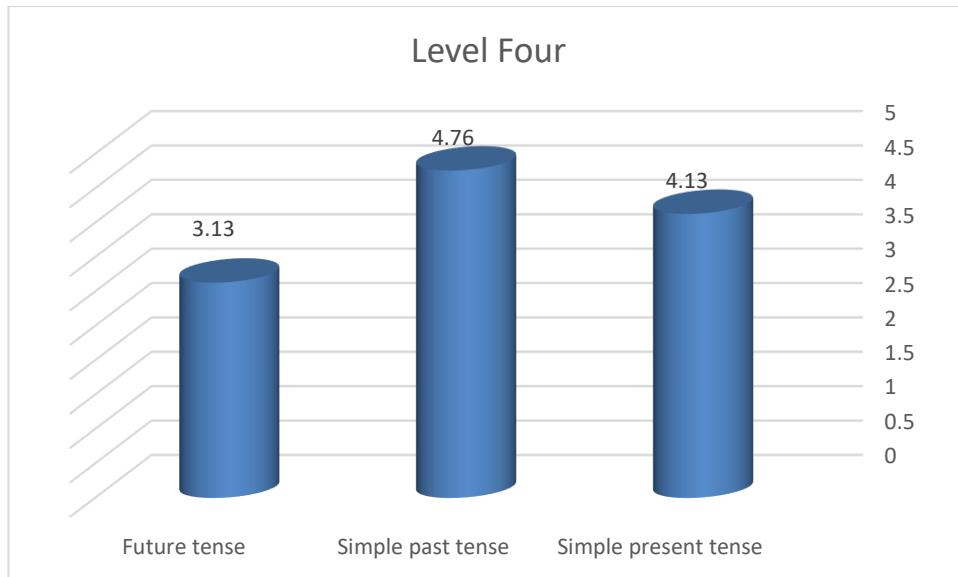


Figure 4 Tense Categories by Students in Level Four

Table 5 and Figure 3 clearly show that the t-value for total tense (4.96, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05), and the real mean (12.03) is higher than the assumed mean (9) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 18 questions = 9) which confirms that the level of the students in total tense is high. The t-value for present tense (4.07, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05), and the real mean (4.13) is higher than the assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students in the present tense is high. The t-value for past tense (6.34, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05), and the real mean (4.67) is higher than the assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students in the past tense is high. The t-value for future tense (2.62, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (a level of 0.05), and the real mean (3.13) is higher than the assumed mean (3) (where assumed mean = middle degree of 6 questions = 3), which confirms that the level of the students in the future tense is high.

It seems that level three and four students received sufficient instructions and teaching while learning English. For three semesters, they have been studying English grammar. As a result, the researchers noticed a lot of progress in the level three and four students' performance. These students were mainly correct in their answers for the different English tenses represented. In levels three and four, the range of accurate choices increases. Level three students are practically on par with level four students. The academic progress of level three and level four students is only slightly different. Similar findings were reported in studies by Mudhsh (2018) and Mudhsh et al. (2021).

The T-tests for two-sample inferential statistics were used to compare male and female students across four levels of competency in tense categories. Table 7 describes the result of the t-test for two samples.

Table 7 Result of Two Independent Samples t-test

	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	D. f.	T	Sig.	Decision
Present	Male	60	2.61	1.61	118	0.81	0.415	No difference
	Female	60	2.85	1.50				
Past	Male	60	3.01	1.77	118	1.61	0.110	No difference
	Female	60	3.55	1.85				
Future	Male	60	2.58	1.35	118	0.43	0.665	No difference
	Female	60	2.48	1.15				
Sum	Male	60	8.21	3.77	118	1.03	0.302	No difference
	Female	60	8.88	3.25				

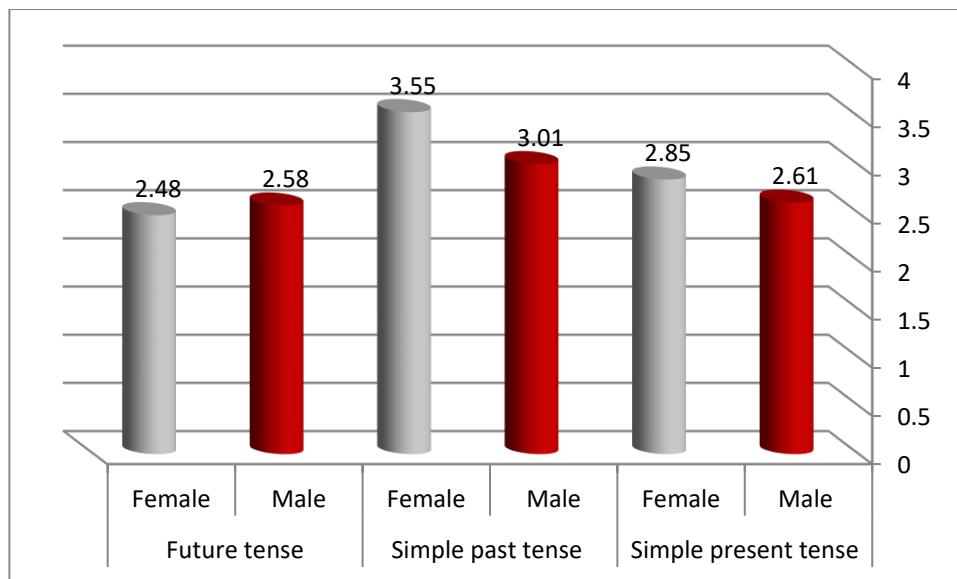


Figure 5 Two Independent Samples t-test

Table 7 and Figure 5 clearly depict that the t-test values are not significant ($P > 0.05$), which confirms that there is no significant difference in precision in the level of competency of tense categories among male and female students in the four levels. In relation to gender, they have the same level in the three tense categories. Besides, the English future tense was more difficult than any of the other categories for the four-level students. This result agrees with the result of a study by Mudhsh et al. (2021). This also reminds us of the differences between the English and Arabic grammatical systems, which affect how time is expressed in each language.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the level of competency in tense categories among Omani EFL students enrolled at the English Language Unit of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, UTAS-Salalah. Based on the analysis, it is shown that the level of competency in the tense categories for level one is low. The t-value for the total score is (6.83, $P < 0.05$) which is significant at (a level of 0.05). Level two students are not different from level one, where their competency level is low at a total score (3.27, $P < 0.05$) that is significant at (a level of 0.05). This is perhaps levels one and two students were still unable to conceptualize the tense categories. Moreover, students resort to their mother tongue, as it is clear from their answers. As for level three students, t-value for total score (0.45, $P > 0.01$) is not significant at (0.05) level, thus confirming that the level of competency of the students is middle. Also, the t-value for total tense (4.96, $P < 0.05$) is significant at (0.05) level, and it proves that the level of competency of students in tense categories is high. The level of competency in tense categories among male and female students in the four levels is the same. The t-test values are not significant ($P > 0.05$), which confirms that there is no significant difference in precision according to gender in the three tense categories. Finally, it was noted that the students' mother tongue has a negative role in the competency of tenses, especially for levels one and two students. This can be supported by future studies that can focus on the possible effect of L1 on L2 tenses, considering varied linguistic backgrounds and employing other methods, such as discourse-based interviews (DBI), to elicit much information from the participants about what makes tense performance and competency challenging for them. Besides, other studies can include larger samples from different educational Omani institutions.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

It is advised that EFL instructors consider the distinctions between the English and Arabic systems with respect to tense in light of the study's results. The variations between the tenses and aspects of Arabic and English should be continuously shown to students separately. The impact of students' native language, Arabic, on their acquisition or level of competency in

English grammar should be carefully studied and swiftly assessed. Additionally, while teaching the various English tense categories to Omani EFL students, particularly in the preparatory years, EFL instructors should pay considerable attention to the application of the English future tense.

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