

CHAPTER 4

ERROR ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The Error Analysis is concerned with the same problems as Contrastive Analysis but from an opposing point of view. In Error Analysis, the error has been defined as a deviation from the norm of the target language and a distinction has been made between errors and mistakes. The error is what takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge whereas the mistake comes up when learners fail to perform their competence. Errors have been further divided into overt and covert (Corder, 1971), errors of correctness and appropriateness, as far as identification of error is concerned, and into presystematic, systematic and postsystematic regarding their description (Corder, 1974).

In general, L2 acquisition research tackled with the error sources which might be psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, epistemic or residing in the discourse structures. Richards (1971), when trying to identify the causes of competence errors he came up with three types of errors: interference errors, which reflect the use of elements from one language to the other, intralingual errors, subdivided into errors due to overgeneralization, or to ignorance of rules restriction, which is incomplete application of the rules, or finally due to the false concept hypothesis, which demonstrate the general characteristics of rule learning and third developmental errors when the learner builds hypothesis about the target language based on limited experience.

4.2 Methodology and Instrument

The CA/EA analysis method described in Chapter 1 is used in this study. In chapter 3 we have described the past tenses in Arabic and French and made some comparisons between them. In this chapter we focus on the errors of Arab learners of French.

For the purpose of this study the instrument used consists of a test which was administered to the students before the end of Year 4. This test consists of four passages in which all the verbs to be used were given in the infinitive form. There were altogether 108 items consisting of verbs from different groups and the subjects were required to use the correct past tense i.e. either the *passé composé*, the *imparfait*, the *plus-que-parfait* or the *passé simple* of these verbs, according to the context. As the test is on the use of the correct past tense, the form of the verbs was in the infinitive to lessen the burden of finding the appropriate vocabulary. The students would then have more time in deciding the correct tense and form to be used. Passages were used to create a story line, which would require the use of a certain past tense. Sometimes both tenses could be employed. The passages were taken from different sources and adapted to suit the objectives of the research. The test was answered within 2 hours and was supervised by the lecturer.

This test aims to find out whether the subjects could use the correct French past tenses in a given context. French tenses are a fusion of the concepts of time and aspect. The choice of these tenses is not always easy for Arab students learning French because past tenses in Arabic are represented using the basic past and present tenses with auxiliary verbs. Moreover some French tenses do not exist in Arabic. Thus the correct choice of tense could present a problem to Arab students learning French. Besides deciding on which tense to use, learners of French have also to learn the various inflections of the tenses.

The answers that the subjects give would reveal the strategies they use to learn the tenses and their application. As the tense system in Arabic uses inflective forms that are simpler than that of Latin languages, we could expect some interference from Arabic. The aim of this test is also to see whether the subjects have understood the rules of conjugation. From the errors committed we can gain insights into how they try to solve their problems.

4.3 The Subjects and the Results of the Questionnaire

The subjects of the EA were a group of students enrolled in an undergraduate program of French language and literature from the French Department at An-najah National University in Palestine. These students have had about 128 contact hours in French. The program consists of 8 semesters with a total of 121 credit hours of French Language and 24 credit hours of a few other subjects offered as a requirement for graduation.

A questionnaire was distributed at the end of the semester after the students had completed their final examination. All the students speak Arabic as their mother tongue. 40% of them have studied French in school. To the question on their self-evaluation of their competency in English, 30 % of them think that their level of French is “very good” while 60 % of them think their level in French is “good” and 10 % believe that their level in French is “satisfactory”.

Table 4.1: Respondents’ Evaluation of Their Level in French

Your level in French is:	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Bad	Total
Number of students	9	18	3	0	30
Percentage (%)	30.0	60.0	10.0	0.0	100.0

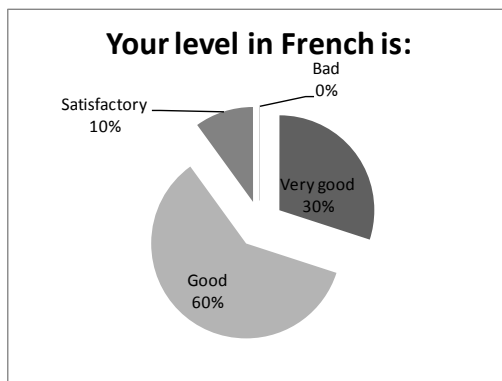


Figure 4.1: Respondents' Level in French

These subjects speak French at different frequencies. 13.3% of them rarely speak French and the same percentage occasionally. 40% of them often speak French, and 33.3% of the subjects always.

Table 4.2: Respondents' Frequency of Speaking French

You speak French:	Rarely	Occasionally	Often	Always	Total
Number of students	4	4	12	10	30
Percentage (%)	13.3	13.3	40.0	33.3	100.0

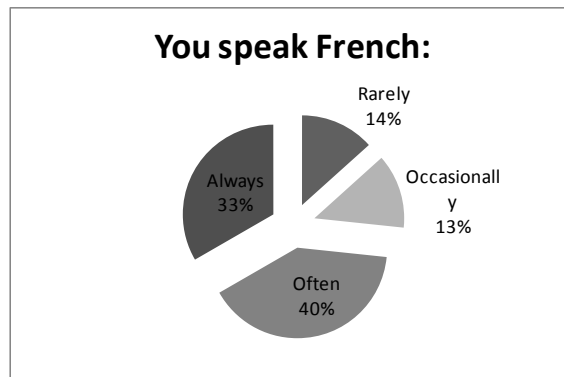


Figure 4.2: Respondents' Frequency of Speaking French

When learning French, 56.7 % of them make comparison with Arabic, 16.7 % of the respondents very often compare French tenses with English tenses. 26.7 % fall under the category of others where all except for one do not make any comparison with another language. The only student who does, makes comparison with Italian.

Table 4.3: Comparison with Other Languages

You make comparison	Arabic	English	Others
Number of students	17	5	8
Percentage (%)	56.7	16.7	26.7

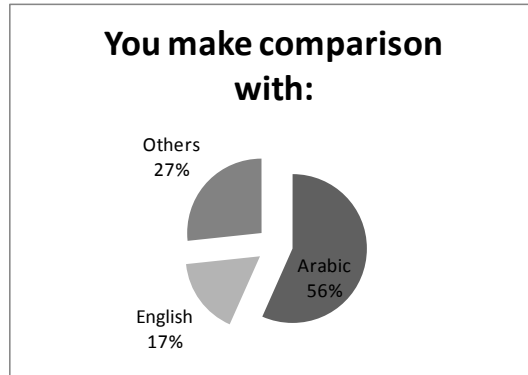


Figure 4.3: Comparison with Other Languages

Answers to the other questions are shown in the Figure below. Only 20% of them always use the dictionary, while 27% often use it and 37% occasionally. 13 % rarely use it and only 3% never use the dictionary. 33% of them occasionally do revision work after the class. 33% do revision often after class. Always, rarely, and never are the answers for 13%, 14%, and 7% of the respondents respectively. 50% of them use other books than the textbooks and 77% of them use French websites on the Internet.

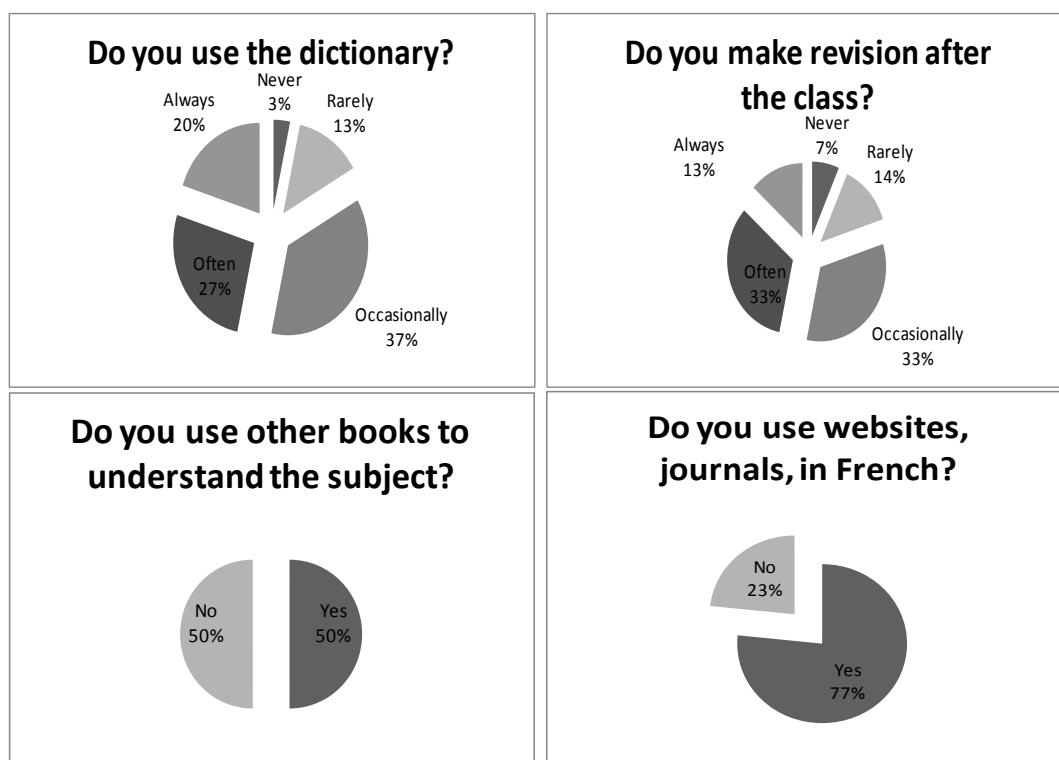


Figure 4.4: Respondents' Answers to Some Questions

The degree comprises 136 credit hours which are approximately 16 contact hours per week per semester for 8 semesters 16 weeks each. The subjects of the test had already completed about 110 credit hours of French and had already learned the following tenses:

- The present tense (*le présent*)
- The future tense (*le futur*)
- The perfect tense (*le passé composé*)
- The pluperfect tense (*le plus-que-parfait*)
- The imperfect tense (*l'imparfait*)
- The simple past/past historic tense (*le passé simple*)

The past tenses were taught towards the end of the first year until the end of the third year, and were used in dialogues or passages in the textbook to introduce other grammatical items. The students for this study were selected for the following reasons:

- Homogeneity of age

- Same mother tongue which is the Arabic language
- The same level of proficiency in French

There were 30 students, 21 of whom were female and 9 male. The majority were aged between 22 and 23. All of the 30 respondents were majoring in French language and literature.

4.4 Evaluation and Classification of the Errors

The passages for the test have been taken from various sources and some have been adapted to suit the researcher's needs. These passages and their answers are found in the appendices. The subjects' script were corrected and evaluated by the researcher based on the answers provided by three native speakers. There are four passages with a total of 108 items. The items are distributed in the four passages as follows:

- Passage A: 43 items
- Passage B: 29 items
- Passage C: 27 items
- Passage D: 9 items

In passage A, the verb *enfermer* has not been included in the analysis as it is the only verb that has to be conjugated in the *plus-que-parfait*. The number of items that will be analyzed for correct choice of tense will be 107 or as follows:

- Passage A: 42 items
- Passage B: 29 items
- Passage C: 27 items
- Passage D: 9 items

The errors are classified under the following categories:

- choice of tense

- choice of auxiliary
- formation of the past participle
- agreement of the past participle with the subject
- agreement of the *imparfait* with the subject
- agreement of the *plus-que-parfait* with the subject
- agreement of the *passé simple* with the subject

The researcher attempted to interpret the choice of tense following a certain guideline, which is given in Section 4.4.1. This interpretation is necessary as the forms given by the students were at times incorrectly formed and very ambiguous. To discuss different types of errors, only answers considered as the correct choice of the tense were taken into account. The errors were tabulated according to their frequency and explanation given regarding the sources of errors:

- a. Interlingual errors or negative transfer
- b. intralingual and developmental errors as posited by Richards (1974), i.e.:
 - overgeneralization
 - ignorance of rule restrictions
 - incomplete application of rules
 - false concepts hypothesized

Negative transfer is the result of L1 interference. Some errors can be attributed to the use of structures, forms and categories of previously learned languages. In this study, the previously learned languages are Arabic (the mother tongue of the students) and English (the second language).

Overgeneralization refers to an instant when a learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of their experience of other structures in the target language. It normally involves the

creation of one deviant structure in place of two regular structures. (Richards, 1985:48)
Redundancy reduction is an example of overgeneralization. Some teaching techniques can also create over-generalized structures.

Ignorance of the rule restrictions is closely related to generalization of deviant structures. The learner fails to observe the restrictions of existing structures on applying rules to contexts where they do not apply (Richards, 1985:49). Analogy and rote learning of rules provide instances of errors in this type.

A learner may also fail to apply the operational rules of the target language to produce acceptable utterances. Redundancy may be a factor. Another factor could be the motivation to achieve communication rather than production of grammatically correct structures.

Sometimes certain concepts are falsely hypothesized due to faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language. The learner's exposure to quite a number of the TL rules and to poorly graded-teaching items could lead him to make his own assumptions of the rules without adequately understanding them.

4.4.1 Choice of Tense

The choice of tense for every question is not always clear as the forms given were, in some cases, incorrectly conjugated and thus ambiguous. In trying to interpret the answers i.e. whether the choice is the *passé composé*, the *imparfait*, the *plus-que-parfait*, or the *passé simple* the researcher has decided to adapt the guidelines below:

- a. An answer will be taken to be in the *passé composé* if it shows a compound formation i.e. if it contains an auxiliary and a past participle. The form of the auxiliary and the past participle may not be correctly formed but the manifestation

of a semblance of a compound tense is taken as an intention on the part of the subject to use the *passé composé*. Therefore, answers such as the following will be taken as intention to use the *passé composé*:

- *avons resté, sa forme, est frappe, sommes montée.
- b. An answer is also considered as *passé composé* if there is only the presence of a past participle or an incorrectly formed past participle such as:
 - *ai ouvri/ ai ouvré / ai ouvre, a cri / a crie / a criée.
- c. A verbal construction is also taken to be the *passé composé* if there is a combination of the *passé composé* and the *imparfait* i.e. the second part of the *passé composé* which is supposed to be a past participle is replaced by an *imparfait* endings e.g.: *s'est formait, a disait, ai ouvrais. The decision to consider the above constructions as intention on the part of the respondents to use the *passé composé* was made after the respondents concerned were asked on their choice.

An item is considered to be in the *imparfait* if it shows a simple tense with an *imparfait* ending. This includes:

- correctly formed *imparfait* forms (correct stem and correct endings).
- an infinitive formed with an *imparfait* ending e.g. *voirait*
- an incorrectly-formed stem with *imparfait* endings e.g: *faisait*: *faissait, *voyait*: *voiait.

An answer will be taken to be in the *plus-que-parfait* in the following cases:

- a. If it shows a compound formation i.e. if it contains an auxiliary and a past participle. The auxiliary and the past participle may not be correctly formed. The compound tense with auxiliary in the *imparfait* is taken as an intention on the part of the

subject to use the *plus-que-parfait*. Therefore, answers such as the following will be taken as intention to use the *plus-que-parfait* :

- **avait décédé, avait parti / avait partir.*

An answer is also considered to be in the *plus-que-parfait* if there is only the presence of an auxiliary (*être* or *avoir*) conjugated in the *imparfait* without the past participle such as: *était, avait*. This answer is also considered to be in the *imparfait*.

Regarding the *passé simple*, an answer is considered to be in the *passé simple*, if it shows a simple tense with a *passé simple* ending. This includes:

- correctly formed *passé simple* (correct stem and correct endings).
- an infinitive formed with a *passé simple* ending.
- an incorrectly-formed stem with a *passé simple* ending.

A form in the present tense is not considered as any of the tenses: *passé composé, imparfait, plus-que-parfait, passé simple*.

Based on these guidelines, the errors made by the subjects were recorded and analyzed. Table 4.4 below shows the frequency of errors made by the subjects in the choice of tense for the four passages. The total possible correct answers for choice of tense for every passage refers to the total number of correct answers that could be obtained if every subject gives the correct answer for every item tested in the passage. The average frequency of incorrect choice of tense made by the respondents for the four passages is 48.3%. This means that the respondents could only make the right choice of tense for less than half of the items. Figure 4.5 shows these numbers in a bar chart. It is shown that the subjects made the right choice for more than 50% of the items in passages A and C, while in passage B, the choice was a little less than 50%. The worst was in passage D where only 10.7% of the choices were correct.

Table 4.4: Frequency of Correct and Incorrect Choice of Tense

Passage	No. of Items	Total possible correct answers for choice of tense	Correct answers given	% of correct answers	Incorrect answers	% of incorrect answers
A	42	1092	633	58.0	459	42.0
B	29	754	351	46.6	403	53.4
C	27	702	429	61.1	273	38.9
D	9	234	25	10.7	209	89.3
Total	107	2782	1438	51.7	1344	48.3

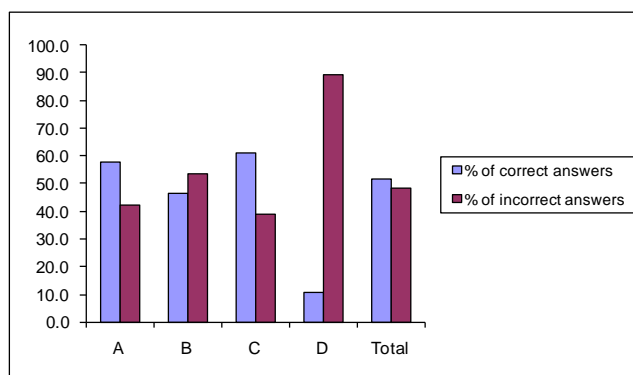


Figure 4.5: Frequency of Correct and Incorrect Choice of Tense

The total number of correct answers for the use of the *passé composé* is 425. This is about 58.4% of the possible correct answers. For the *imparfait*, 57.9 % of the possible correct answers of 1508 exhibit correct use of the *imparfait*.

Table 4.5: Results of the Test on the Choice of Tense (*Passé Composé*)

Passage	No. of Items	Total possible correct answers for choice of tense	Correct answers given	% of correct answers	Incorrect answers	% of incorrect answers
A	17	442	260	58.8	182	41.2
B	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
C	11	286	165	57.7	121	42.3
D	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	28	728	425	58.4	303	41.6

The figure below shows the results of the correct use of *passé composé* in bar format. It is clearly seen that the respondents have correctly used the *passé composé* in slightly less than two thirds of the items in both passages A and C. The other passages do not require the use of the *passé composé*.

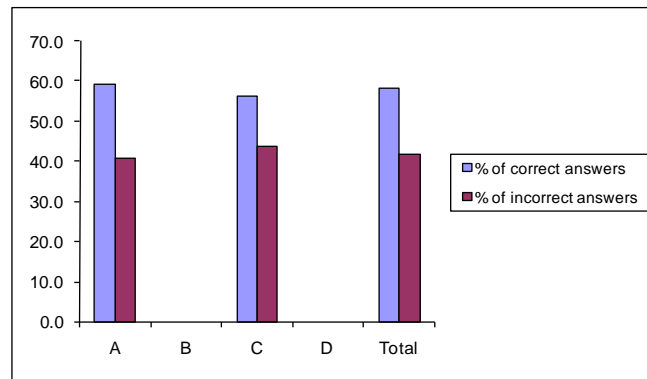


Figure 4.6: Results of the Test on Choice of Tense (*Passé Composé*)

The correct use of the *imparfait* is shown in Table 4.6 below. The correct answers given in each passage are stated. All passages have *imparfait* items except for passage D. The percentages of correct answers for passages A, B, and C are given as 57.4%, 53.4%, and 63.5% respectively. We could say that the respondents have chosen the correct answers for slightly more than half of the items in all three passages.

Table 4.6: Results of the Test on the Choice of Tense (*Imparfait*)

Passage	No. of Items	Total possible correct answers for choice of tense	Correct answers given	% of correct answers	Incorrect answers	% of incorrect answers
A	25	650	373	57.4	277	42.6
B	17	442	236	53.4	206	46.6
C	16	416	264	63.5	152	36.5
D	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	58	1508	873	57.9	635	42.1

Figure 4.7 shows the results using the bar format. It is clear that the participants have in general the ability to give the right answer for more than half of the items.

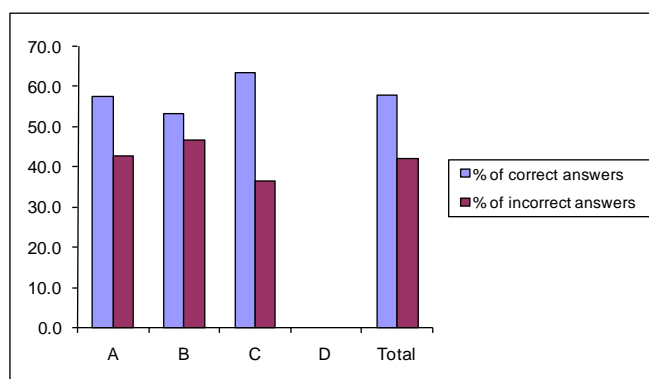


Figure 4.7: Results of the Test on Choice of Tense (*Imparfait*)

Table 4.7 below summarizes the number of answers for the correct form (auxiliary, past participle and agreement with the direct object pronoun and the subject) of the *passé composé* of the verbs used. Only 28.2% of the verbs conjugated in the *passé composé* were incorrect in form as compared to its use. For example: **sommen restée*, **avons resté*, **avons dirigé*. This shows that the subjects find it more difficult to use the *passé composé* than to form it. On the other hand, they make fewer errors forming the *imparfait* (Table 4.14) but more errors in its correct use. They scored 91.7 % for the agreement of the *imparfait* with the subject and only 57.9% for the choice of the tense in the appropriate situations.

Table 4.7: Results of the Test on the Correct Form of the *Passé Composé*.

Passage	No. of Items	Total possible correct forms	Total no. of correct forms	% of correct forms	Total no. of incorrect forms	% of incorrect forms
A	17	260	192	73.8	68	26.2
B	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
C	11	165	113	68.5	52	31.5
D	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	11	425	305	71.8	120.0	28.2

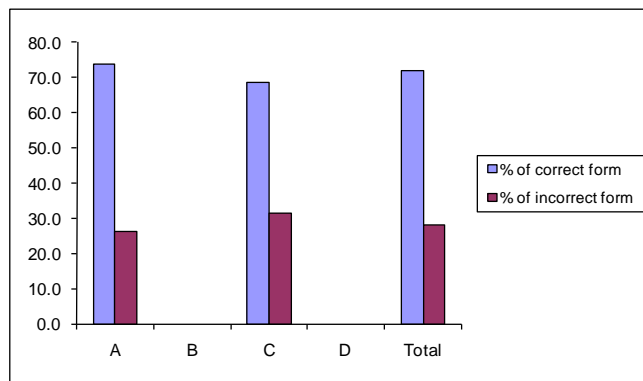


Figure 4.8: Results of the Test on the Correct Form of the *Passé Composé*.

The reason for a higher score for the subject verb agreement for the *imparfait* is that its formation or conjugation is not as complex as the *passé composé*. It is a simple tense formed with regular ending and almost regular stems. On the other hands, the *passé composé* is a compound tense, which is formed with either the auxiliary *être* or *avoir* and the past participle of the principal verb. If it is formed with *être*, the past participle has to agree with the subject in number and gender. For example: *ils sont arrivés, il s'est formé, nous sommes montés, elle est sortie*. If it is formed with the verb *avoir*, the past participle has to agree with a preceding direct object, which can be a noun, personal pronoun, a relative pronoun or an interrogative adjective. For example: *le livre qu'ils ont commencé, le repas qu'elle a commencé, le poème que j'ai appris, le secret qu'elle a dit, l'oiseau que j'ai aperçu*. The verbs that take the auxiliary verb *être* are some movement verbs and the pronominals.

As to the use of the two tenses in various situations, learners may find the *imparfait* more difficult due to its subtle aspectual notion. It is used to describe at least three aspects, namely, durative (descriptive), iterative (habitual) and imperfective (progressive). The *passé composé* is used to relate discrete events and actions. As it describes an action viewed in its entirety, it has more perceptual saliency than the *imparfait*, which is semantically more complex.

4.4.2 Choice and Form of the Auxiliary for the *Passé Composé*

Table 4.8: Choice of Auxiliary in the Use of the *Passé Composé*

Passage	No. of answers with correct tense	Total no. of correct answers	Total no. of correct auxiliary	% of correct auxiliary	Total no. of wrong auxiliary	% of wrong auxiliary	Total no. of no auxiliary	% of no auxiliary
A	17	260	239	91.9	20	7.7	1	0.4
B	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
C	11	165	156	94.5	6	3.6	3	1.8
D	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	11	425	395	92.9	26	6.1	4	0.9

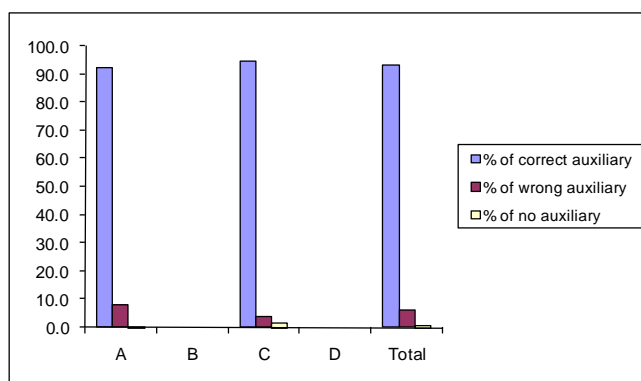


Figure 4.9: Choice of Auxiliary in the Use of the *Passé Composé*

The choice of auxiliary concerns the use of the *passé composé*. Of the 117 verbs, 28 of them require the use of the *passé composé* and of these 20 items take *avoir*, while 8 require *être*. As can be seen in Table 4.8 there are a total of 425 answers with the correct tense chosen which is the *passé composé*. Out of this total, 395 answers, representing 92.2% of the total, use the correct auxiliary (correct or incorrect form), 6.1% use the wrong auxiliary or a deviant form and 0.9% are without an auxiliary. The absence of an auxiliary could be a case of incomplete application of rules.

Of the 26 answers with wrong or deviant forms, 76.9 % of them indicated the choice of the auxiliary *avoir* when it should be *être*. Most French verbs use *avoir* to form the *passé composé* except for a special group of verbs, most of which are movement verbs and all the reflexive verbs.

Table 4.9: Errors in the Use of *être* and *avoir* (*Passé Composé*)

Passage	Total no. of wrong auxiliary	Answers uses avoir instead of être	% of answers uses avoir instead of être	Answers uses être instead of avoir	% of answers uses être instead of avoir
A	20	14	70.0	7	35.0
B					
C	6	6	100.0	0	0.0
D					
Total	26	20	76.9	7	26.9

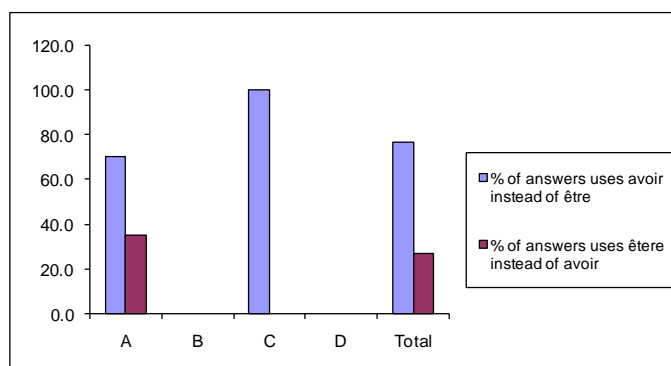


Figure 4.10: Errors in the Use of *être* and *avoir* (*Passé Composé*)

The use of *avoir* instead of *être* probably indicates the overgeneralization of the use of *avoir* and also the transfer of the English perfect tense. 26.9 % used *être* when the auxiliary should be *avoir*. The students might be confused. Some common errors in the use of the auxiliary are:

- **Quand on est frappé (frapper) à ma porte.*
- **Nous avons resté (rester) là environ*
- **C'est là que nous avons dirigé. (se diriger)*
- **nous sommes dû (devoir) faire demi-tour.*
- **... là et nous avons montés (monter) dans le train ...*
- **Quand j'est vu (voir) cette foule,...*
- **J'est eu (avoir) le souffle coupé.*

The conjugation of the auxiliary does not constitute a big problem. This could probably be due to the fact that the present indicative form of *être* and *avoir* are basic forms that were learnt in the first year of the university and have been used often since then. The occurrence of the wrong form represents only 7.1% of the total choice of correct auxiliary as can be seen in Table 4.9. Some examples of wrong auxiliary form are: **j'a aperçu*, **sommés montu*, **elle es sorti*, **elle ai poussée*, **elle as voulait*.

Table 4.10: Correct Form of the Auxiliary (*Passé Composé*)

Passage	Total no. of correct auxiliary use	Total no. of correct auxiliary form	% of correct auxiliary form	Total no. of wrong auxiliary form	% of wrong auxiliary form
A	239	216	90.4	23	9.6
B		0	0.0	0	0.0
C	156	151	96.8	5	3.2
D		0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	395	367	92.9	28	7.1

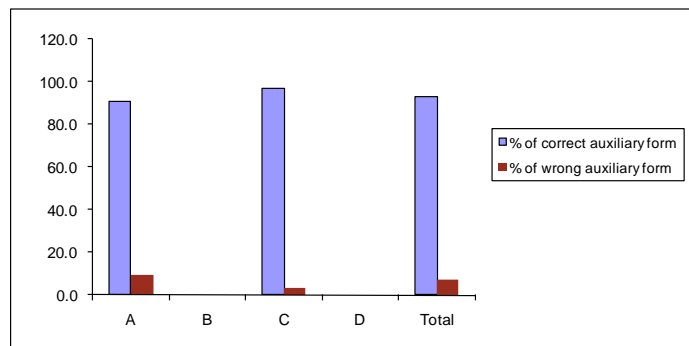


Figure 4.11: Correct Form of the Auxiliary (*Passé Composé*)

4.4.3 Formation of the Past Participle in the *Passé Composé* Form

Table 4.10 shows the frequency of errors committed by the subjects when conjugating the basic form of the past participle of the various verbs. About 23.3 % were not correctly formed. Of this percentage, 3.5 % are without the *accent aigu* on the final -e, 0.2 % of the answers are in the infinitive and 2.1 % have an *imparfait* ending.

Table 4.11: Frequency of Correctly Formed Past Participles (*Passé Composé*)

Passage	Total no. of correct answers	Correctly formed past participle	% of correctly formed past participle	Deviant forms of past participle	% of Deviant forms of past participle	Answers with no accent	% of answers with no accent	Use of Infinitive	% of the use of infinitive	With imparfait ending	% with imparfait ending
A	260	211	81.2	37	14.2	5	1.9	1	0.4	6	2.3
B	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
C	165	115	69.7	37	22.4	10	6.1	0	0.0	3	1.8
D	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	425	326	76.7	74	17.4	15	3.5	1	0.2	9	2.1

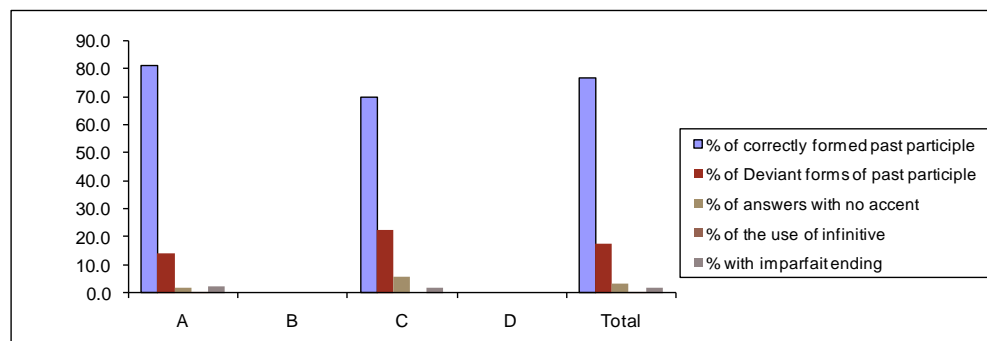


Figure 4.12: Frequency of Correctly Formed Past Participles (*Passé Composé*)

The use of the *imparfait* ending for the past participle involves only six subjects. We can classify the answers of these subjects as intention to use the *imparfait*, in such a case, these errors could be a case of hypercorrection. Very often, learners have a tendency to use only the past participle for the *passé composé*, the teacher have overemphasized the use of the auxiliaries for the *passé composé*, which could have led to confusion and consequently hypercorrection. Moreover, the distinction between the sound [e] of some past participles and [ɛ] of the *imparfait* ending may not have been perceived by learners. For example, *elle a mangé* with [e] sound, and the sound [ɛ] *elle attendait* with the *imparfait* ending.

There are 15 cases (3.5%) of the past participle of –er verbs being formed without an *accent aigu* (´) on the final -e and 1 case (0.2%) was formed with the ending of the *imparfait* added to the infinitive itself. The absence of the accent could be an oversight on the part of the learner, as some of them have not made it a habit to mark the accents or use the correct accents.

Seven participants used an *imparfait* ending because they might be unfamiliar with the verbs. The erroneous forms are: **il s'est formait, il a prendrais, ils ont commençait, on disait, j'ai criait, elle a voulait, nous avons deveions.*

4.4.4 Agreement of the Past Participle with the Subject

The past participle of intransitive verbs conjugated with *être* in the *passé composé* agrees in gender and number with the subject e.g. *nous sommes arrivés, il s'est formé, nous sommes montés.*

The past participle of reflexive verbs agrees with the subject of reflexive verbs. There is no agreement if the reflexive pronoun is equivalent to an indirect object. However, if there is a direct object in the sentence and it precedes the verb, the past participle agrees with the preceding direct object e.g. *j'ai appris, elle est sortie, j'ai regardé.*

Table 4.12: Agreement of the Past Participle with a Singular Subject

Passage	Total no. of possible answers	Attempts to form pp with singular subject	Correct agreement with gender	% of correct agreement in gender	Incorrect agreement in gender	% of Incorrect agreement in gender	Correct agreement in number	% of correct agreement in number	Incorrect agreement in number	% of Incorrect agreement in number
A	338	185	175	94.6	10	5.4	177	95.7	8	4.3
B	0		0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.0	0	0.0
C	234	131	108	82.4	23	17.6	127	96.9	4	3.1
D	0		0	0.0	0	0.0				
Total	572	316	283	89.6	33	10.4	306	96.8	12	3.8

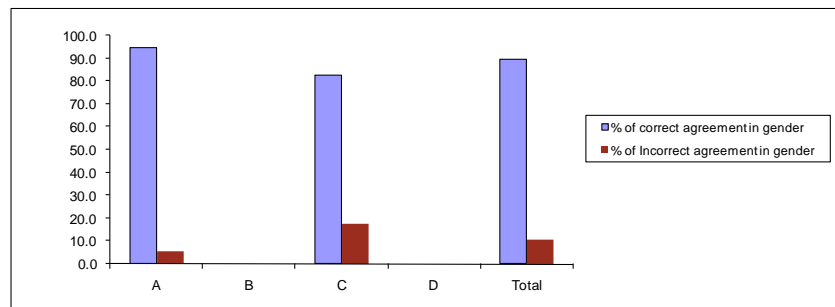


Figure 4.13: Agreement of the Past Participle in Gender

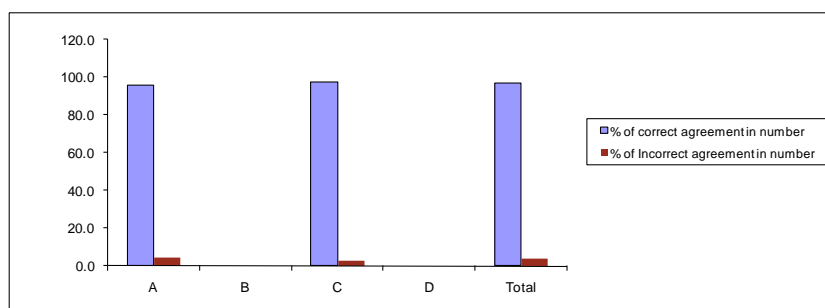


Figure 4.14: Agreement of the Past Participle in Number (Singular)

To decide whether the subjects have made an agreement in gender and number, the incorrect or deviant forms of the past participle are overlooked. The past participles are taken to be in agreement with the subject when there is a manifestation of an *e* or an *s* following the correctly or incorrectly-formed past participle. Of the 8 verbs in passages A and C that form their *passé composé* with the auxiliary *être*, one verb requires a past participle in the feminine singular form.

Of the total number of answers of 572, related to the use of the *passé composé* and thus requiring the past participle, only 283, representing 89.6% of the answers have made the correct agreement in gender with a singular subject, masculine or feminine (Table 4.12). This means that only (10.4%) of the answers were not given the correct agreement in gender. There are 12 cases of incorrect agreement in number representing 3.8% of the answers.

Of the 82 attempts to form the past participle with a plural subject (Table 4.13), 47, i.e. 57.3% of the answers, gave the correct agreement in number. For example: *nous sommes dirigés*, *ils sont arrivés*. For the agreement in gender with a plural masculine subject, the participants scored higher. For example: *ils ont commencé*, *nous avons dû*. This is due to the fact that the past participle for a masculine subject just requires the basic form.

The past participle of verbs that form their *passé composé* with *être* has to agree with the subject in gender and number while those formed with *avoir* do not. The non-observance of this rule could be due to overgeneralization, a strategy that attempts to reduce the redundancy in the target language so as to reduce the learning load. As for the incorrect answers for agreement in number, this could be a case of hypercorrection.

Table 4.13: Agreement of the Past Participle with a Plural Subject

Passage	Total no. of answers	Attempts to form pp with a plural subject	Correct agreement in gender	% correct agreement in gender	Incorrect agreement in gender	% of Incorrect agreement in gender	Correct agreement in number	% correct agreement in number	Incorrect agreement in number	% of Incorrect agreement in number
A	104	52	45	86.5	7	13.5	35	67.3	17	32.7
B	0		0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.0	0	0.0
C	52	30	22	73.3	8	26.7	10	33.3	20	66.7
D	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Total	156	82	67	81.7	15	18.3	47	57.3	37	45.1

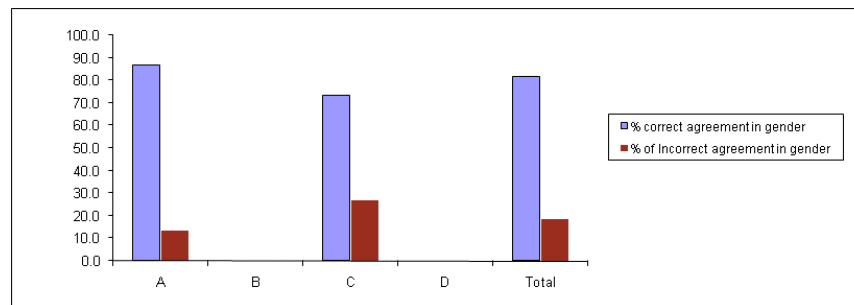


Figure 4.15: Agreement of the Past Participle in Number and Gender

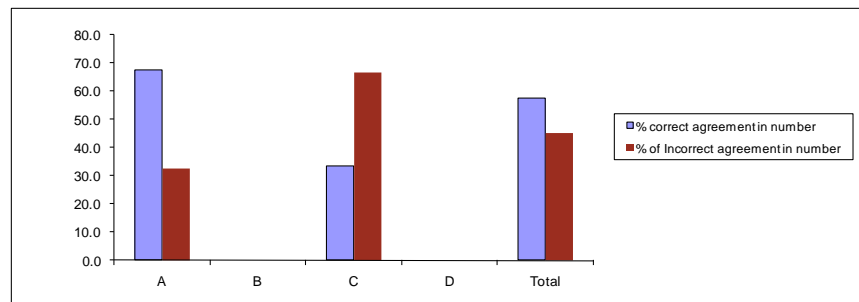


Figure 4.16: Agreement of the Past Participle in Number (Plural)

4.4.5 Agreement of the Imparfait with the Subject

Like all tenses, the *imparfait* has to be conjugated according to the various persons. There are a total of 637 answers which require the use of the *imparfait*. As shown in Table 4.14, 91.7% produced the correct agreement in person.

Another 5.2% show some attempt at subject-verb agreement but the stem was incorrectly formed. Only 3.1% do not indicate correct subject-verb agreement. The answers with correct agreement but deviant stems are: *nous éptions, nous étion, nous allions, il occupait, nous empecheons, nous fasion, il etait, nous allons, nous empcheions, il manifestait*. The students make mistakes in the conjugation.

Table 4.14: Agreement of the *Imparfait* with the Subject

Passage	Correct choice of tense	Correct agreement in person	% of correct agreement in person	Correct agreement, deviant stem	% of correct agreement, deviant stem	No agreement	% of no agreement
A	373	333	89.3	26	7.0	14	3.8
B	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
C	264	251	95.1	7	2.7	6	2.3
D	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	637	584	91.7	33	5.2	20	3.1

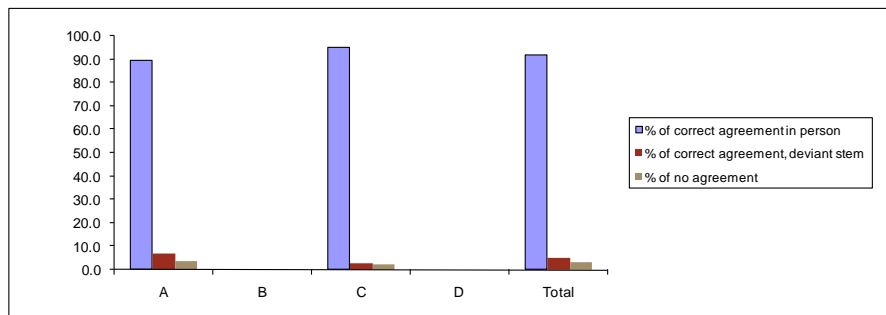


Figure 4.17: Agreement of the *Imparfait* with the Subject.

4.4.6 Use of the *Plus-Que-Parfait*

Table 4.15, summarizes the analysis of the answers for *plus-que-parfait*. The total possible correct answers are 130. 53 out of this number correctly use the *plus-que-parfait*. This is about 40.8% of the possible correct answers while 59.2% are incorrect answers. 20 answers out of the 53, i. e. 37.7% of them are correctly formed. The number of correct auxiliary answers out of these correctly use the *plus-que-parfait* is 42 which is equivalent to 79.2%. Out of these 42 correct auxiliary answers, 20 (47.6%) are given with correct forms. All the 11 mistakes of the incorrect auxiliary out of these correctly use the *plus-que-parfait* were because the students used *avoir* instead of *être*. For examples: **avait décidé, *avait parti*.

Regarding the use of the past participle, the students produced the correct form for 52 (98.1%) answers and only 1 answer (1.9%) had a deviant form. There are 103 singular subjects and 25 plural subjects. Out of the 103 singular subjects, 48 (46.6%) have correct agreement in gender and 50 (48.5%) have correct agreement in number. Out of the 25 plural subjects, only 3 (12%) have agreement in gender and the same percentage for agreement in number.

Table 4.15: Results of the Test on the *Plus-Que-Parfait*

Parameter	Number	No. of Possible Correct Answer	%
number of items	5		
total possible correct answers	130		
correct use	53	130	40.8
incorrect use	77		59.2
correct form	20	53	37.7
incorrect form	33		62.3
auxiliary exist	53		
correct auxiliary	42	53	79.2
incorrect auxiliary	11		20.8
no auxiliary	0		0.0
correct auxiliary form	20	42	47.6
incorrect auxiliary form	22		52.4
avoir instead of être	11	11	100.0
être instead of avoir	0		0.0
correctly formed pp	52	53	98.1
deviant form of the pp	1		1.9
no accent	0		0.0
infinitive	0		0.0
with imparfait ending	0		0.0
singular subject	103		
correct agreement in gender	48	103	46.6
incorrect agreement in gender	55		53.4
correct agreement in number	50	103	48.5
incorrect agreement in number	53		51.5
plural subject	25		
correct agreement in gender	3	25	12.0
incorrect agreement in gender	22		88.0
correct agreement in number	3	25	12.0
incorrect agreement in number	22		88.0

4.4.7 Use of the *Passé Simple*

Table 4.16 shows the possible correct answers for the use of the *passé simple*, the total correct answers are 87, this is about 20.9% the total possible correct answers of 416, and 79.1% of the answers are incorrect. The results of passage D shows higher incorrect use of the tense as most of the students did not do the last passage due to perhaps the time limit. This high score of the wrong use of the tense in general is a result of less experience and practice as compared to other tenses as the *passé simple* is usually the last tense to be learned by the students. The *Passé composé* could also be used instead of *passé simple* and the conjugation of the verb is also difficult.

Table 4.16: Use of the *Passé Simple*

Passage	No. of Items	Total possible correct answers for choice of tense	Correct answers given	% of correct answers	Incorrect answers	% of incorrect answers
A	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
B	7	182	62	34.1	120	65.9
C	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
D	9	234	25	10.7	209	89.3
Total	16	416	87	20.9	329	79.1

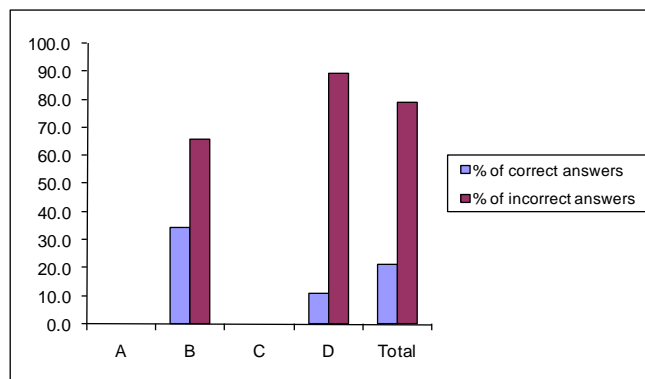


Figure 4.18: Use of the *Passé Simple*

4.4.8 Agreement of the *Passé Simple* with the Subject

Table 4.17: Agreement of the *Passé Simple* with the Subject

Passage	Correct choice of tense	Correct agreement with person	% of correct agreement with person	Correct agreement , deviant stem	% of correct agreement, deviant stem	No agreement	% of no agreement
A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B	62	61	98.4	1	1.6	0	0.0
C	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
D	25	25	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	87	86	98.9	1	1.1	0	0.0

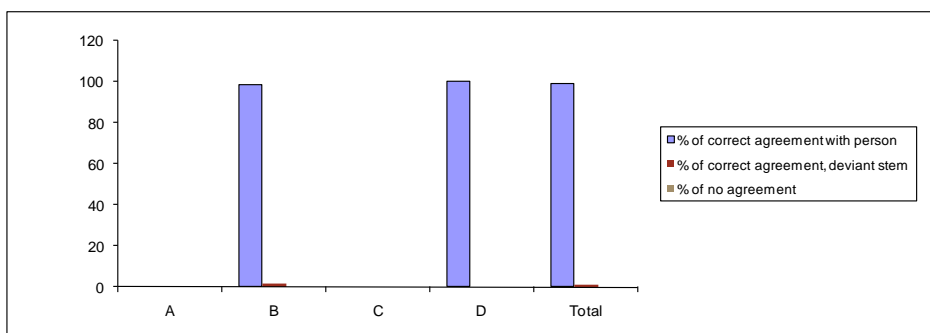


Figure 4.19: Agreement of the *Passé Simple* with the Subject

Like all tenses, the *passé simple* has to be conjugated according to the various persons. In the passage, there are a total of 87 answers for the correct use of this tense. As shown in Table 4.17, 98.9% produce the correct agreement in person and only 1.1% make the correct agreement, but with a deviant stem. For example: *faita*. The students who know when to use the verb know how to make the agreement.

4.5 Discussion

The errors analysed above were grouped into following categories: choice of tense, choice of auxiliary, formation of the past participle, and the agreement of the past participle with the subject.

4.5.1 Choice of Tense

Errors in all the categories except for the category of choice of tense are errors of form. 48.3% of the answers given by the subjects are incorrect in the choice of tense (Table 4.4). This places choice of tense as an area of major difficulty. Analyses on the use of all four tenses show that the results are very similar for the *passé composé* and the *imparfait* (~58% correct) while *plus-que-parfait* seems more difficult (40.8% correct) for the students and the worst results are seen in the use of the *passé simple* (20.9%). However, the test on the correct form of the *passé simple* has the best results with 98.9% of the answers are correct. The results on the form of the *imparfait* (91.7%) are better than those on the form of the *passé composé* (71.8%) while for *plus-que-parfait* the percentage of correct answers received is only 37.7%.

More than half of the answers were not given the correct tense i.e. the respondents found it difficult to choose between the *passé composé*, *plus-que-parfait*, *passé simple* and the *imparfait*. This could be probably explained by the fact that the French tense system is different from the Arabic past tense.

The errors in the use of the French past tenses by Arab learners may not be caused so much by L1 transfer as by the difficulty in grasping the concept of time and aspect as expressed by the tenses. The difference in the tense systems between Arabic and French causes difficulty in differentiating the temporal references of the French tenses especially the past tenses. The *passé composé*, *imparfait* and the *plus -que -parfait* are the three past tenses used in the everyday spoken language. *The passé composé* is used to refer to a completed event or change of state while the *imparfait* designates a condition (durative aspect), a progressive action (imperfective aspect) and a habitual action (reiterative aspect) in the past. *The plus-que-parfait* is used to express an action which precedes another past action

or moment. The distinction between these three tenses is not one of relative time frame but rather of aspect, marking what might be generally referred to as the discreteness of an action versus non-event distinction (Kaplan in Anderson, 1983:52)

This tense aspect distinction could be too complex to understand especially for learners whose linguistic system does not see time in the same perspective. Even the knowledge of the English and Arabic tenses does not necessarily ensure a complete comprehension of the concept of time in French as the use of the various tenses in English, Arabic and French do not correspond exactly. The *passé composé*, *passé simple*, *imparfait*, and the *plus-que-parfait* may generally resemble the English simple past, present perfect, pluperfect, and past continuous respectively. However, they don't have the same corresponding uses and functions. The French *passé simple* is restricted to written and very formal French. In modern and oral French, its role is taken over by the *passé composé*, which can be used aspectually. The *passé composé* may be translated by the English simple past or the present perfect. The *imparfait* may also be translated by the English simple past as well as the past continuous.

In our research, 56.7 % of students made a comparison of the French tenses with Arabic language, 26.7% of them did not make a comparison and 16.6% made a comparison with the English language. More than a half of the students produced equivalent tense from Arabic language even though, there is no one to one equivalent between the Arabic and French tenses. For example at the end of passage C, the verb “*viens*” takes an *imparfait* because it states a background or state of affaires:

- *Un peut plus loin, il y avait un squelette j'ai regardé Julien. Je viens de tout comprendre*

The Arabic translation for this verb would be the simple past:

- [W ala masafa atwal, w ʿali masafa atwal, kan honaka haikal adhmy. Nadharto ila jolian. Wa fahimto kolla shay'] وفهت كل شيء - نظرت الى جوليان. كان هناك هيكل عظمي.

The above sentence also illustrates the use of the *passé composé* for the verb “*ai regardé*”, which refers to punctual action or a completed event. In Arabic the tense used is also the simple past.

In French, the *plus-que-parfait* is also used to express an action which precedes another past action or moments. For example, in passage B the verb “*se présenta*” in the *passé simple* happens before the verb “*était parti*” in the *plus-que-parfait*:

- *L'entretien avec Barbara et Bertrand fut très sympathique. Bertrand, un peu mal à l'aise quand Billot se présenta, avoua qu'il était parti sans rien dire parce qu'on aurait essayé de la retenir et qu'il ne savait pas s'il aurait pu résister.*

The Arabic translation use the simple past for both verbs with the prefix (كان):

- في مقابلة بين باربرا وبرتtrand كانت ودية للغاية. برتراند ، بدى غير مرتاح عندما ظهر بيلوت ، اعترف أنه كان قد غادر دون ان يقولوا شيئا ، لأنهم كانوا سيحاولون أن يبقوه وانه لا يعرف اذا كان بإمكانه ان يقاوم [fi moqabalah bayna barbara wa bertnard kanat wodiya lelghaya. Bertnard, bada ghair mortah indama dhahara bilot, itarafa annaho kana qad ghadara dona an yaqolo shayan, liannahom kano sayohawilona an yobqoho wa annaho la yarif idha kana biemkanehi an yoqawem].

The above examples illustrate the non-correspondence of the Arabic and the French tenses.

The Arabic simple past tense is used in various contexts, for which in French would require a distinction between the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*. As Arabic is the mother tongue of the students we could expect the students to mobilize their knowledge of Arabic tense to solve their problem.

The average score for the correct use of the *passé composé* i.e. 58.4% is very comparable to the *imparfait* (57.9%) and this is 17.2% more than the score for the *plus-que parfait* (40.8%) and 20% more than that of the *passé simple* (20.9%). Only 71.8% of the verbs

using the *passé composé* were formed correctly against 91.7% for the *imparfait*, 37.7% for the *plus-que parfait* and 98.9% for the *passé simple*. The morphological complexities of the *passé composé* and the *plus-que parfait* might explain the larger number of errors for these tenses. The *passé composé* and the *plus-que-parfait* involve two kinds of auxiliaries and a number of regular and irregular past participles. Sometimes, there must be agreement in number and gender for the past participle with the subject. On the other hand, the *imparfait* is a simple tense and its score is high. The *passé simple* is the most difficult tense and this is reflected in the low score for choice of this tense. However, good students who made the correct choice also knew the correct form. Errors of forms involve particularly the *passé composé* and the *plus-que parfait* as they are morphologically more complex than the *imparfait*.

4.5.2 Choice of Auxiliary

On the choice of auxiliary in the present study, only 92.9% of the answers (Table 4.8) were correct. 6.1% had the wrong auxiliary or a deviant form while 4.0% did not have any auxiliary at all. The *passé composé* has a complicated system of using the auxiliary *avoir* for many verbs and *être* for a special category of verbs. Reflexive verbs and a few intransitive verbs (mainly verbs of motion) like: *aller, arriver, sortir, monter, rester, venir...* form their *passé composé* with *être*. In the Arabic language, some of these verbs are not considered motion verbs like *rester* for example and thus the students make mistakes in choosing the correct auxiliary with these verbs.

The wrong choice of auxiliary in some cases however could be due to overgeneralization of the use of *avoir* in the *passé composé* constructions and also to negative transfer. As the majority of French verbs form their *passé composé* with *avoir*, the students may have generalized the rule, forgetting that certain verbs take *être*. It could also be a case of

transfer of the English system as English uses the auxiliary "have" to form the perfect tense. It is highly possible that this is a generalization of the French perfect tense due to the influence of the English perfect tense.

The production of incorrect forms of the auxiliary is also due to insufficient learning and memorization of the various forms of the auxiliary. Incomplete application of rules could be the cause of the absence of the auxiliary before the past participle.

4.5.3 Formation of the Past Participle

Generalization and insufficient learning could be the causes of errors with the past participle. The past participle of the *-er* verbs is formed by adding *-é* to the stem of the infinitive. e.g. *manger* → *mangé*. The *-ir* verbs generally take an *-i* e.g. *partir* → *parti* and some irregular verbs take *-u* e.g. *apercevoir* → *aperçu*. However there are also some common verbs which have irregular past participles e.g. *vouloir* → *voulu*, *prendre* → *pris*, *devoir* → *dû*. These rules need to be learned. Answers such as **devoir* → *devu*, **falloir* → *alleu* are due to the analogy with the verb *avoir* for which the past participle is *eu*.

4.5.4 Agreement of the Past Participle with the Subject

3.5% of the answers are without accents. This could be due to the influence of the English language which does not have a system of agreement of the past participle with the subject in gender. It could also be due to a comparison with the Arabic language. Sometimes Arabic has a different gender from that of French. The feminine in Arabic is masculine in French. For example: *le chocolat*, *le vélo*, *le fromage*, in French are masculines but in Arabic they are feminine. Thus the "e" in this case is dropped because of the influence of the mother tongue. 2.1% use the *imparfait* ending with the past participle. Errors in this

category could be due to incomplete application of rules or over generalisation, an intralingual strategy to reduce the learning load

4.5.5 Agreement of the *Imparfait* with the Subject

Incomplete application of rules might be the cause of errors in subject-verb agreement. Generally the *imparfait* is an easier tense to learn than the *passé composé*. This explains the high score for the formation of the *imparfait*. However there is a small number of answers of those correctly used (5.2%) that did not make the correct agreement. A slightly smaller number (3.1%) made the correct agreement but could not get the right stem forms. Most of these deviant stem forms are mistakes in conjugation.

4.5.6 Agreement of the *Plus-Que-Parfait* with the Subject

46.6% of singular subjects have correct agreement in gender and 48.5% have correct agreement in number. Out of the 25 plural subjects only 12% have agreement with gender and the same percentage has agreement with number. The difficult formation of this tense might explain the high score of errors in subject-verb agreement. The formation of this verb required the students to chose *être* or *avoir* like for the “*passé composé*” then to conjugate the auxiliary in the *imparfait*, with correctly formed past participle.

4.5.7 Agreement of the *Passé Simple* with the Subject

98.9% of the answers had the correct agreement in person and only 1.1% makes the correct agreement, but with a deviant stem. There is no case without agreement which means that those students who know when to use the verb are very good in using it and they know how to make the agreement. However, the percentage of answers that demonstrate the correct use of this tense is very small (20.9%). Only very few students who took extensive French courses outside the university know when and how to use the *passé simple*.

4.6 Conclusion

Errors in the use of the French past tenses are caused by negative transfer as well as by the forms and functions of the target language. Although the knowledge of Arabic and English tenses may tend to interfere in the task of learning the French tenses, it can also be facilitative.