

## Iraqi EFL University Students' Performance of Hypothetical Counterfactuality

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### Abstract

Hypothetical counterfactuality is a type of counterfactual conditionals, its meaning and structure make a challenge for Iraqi EFL university students in recognizing and producing it. This study intends to identify areas of difficulty that face Iraqi EFL university students in recognizing and producing hypothetical counterfactuality correctly as well as Identifying errors committed by them in handling this type. The sample of the study consists of 70 students, twenty students are chosen for the pilot test, and fifty students are chosen for the main test. A mixed research method (involving qualitative and quantitative procedures) is utilized to account for data collection and analysis. The study concludes that the production of hypothetical counterfactuality is the more difficult for students than the recognition of it. This is due to students' lack of grammatical knowledge concerning counterfactuality.

**Keywords:** EFL university students, counterfactuality, counterfactual conditionals, hypothetical counterfactuality, errors analysis.

### Introduction

Counterfactuality is an utterance that expresses the speaker's judgment in which the events could or should have happened, but it did not happen at the end. The structures of counterfactual are double-layered that have two components of meaning; the first indicates that actualization of a state of affairs was potential, i.e. possible, desirable or intended, and the second indicates that it did not take place (Verstraete, 2004:7) . Conditional statements are made in everyday life by people regarding different experienced events or future courses of action and about events that might not have occurred.

Dancygier (1999:26) argues that pedagogical grammar typically presents conditionals with adverbial clauses as complicated sentences, which need separate explanation since they use patterns of verb forms unique to these constructions (e.g. Ward, 1954), hypothetical counterfactuality is one of these patterns, exemplified in the following sentence; (*If it rained, the competition would be postponed*). For Quirk et al. (1985: 1092) pattern like this sentence is called 'open' conditions, that is, conditions which may or may not be met in the knowledge of the speaker. The verb (*rained*) is termed past tense, hypothetical Past, Present Subjunctive, or (*V-ed*), while its main clause verb (*would be postponed*) indicates past modal, conditional, or (*would + V*).

EFL university students face language many grammatical problems; hypothetical counterfactuality is one of the grammatical problems. In this respect, Kharama and Hajjaj (1997:137) illustrate the conditional difficulties, and argue that these difficulties are due to "the forms of the two verbs that depend on each other in the two clauses". In teaching conditionals, they add that three key points must be emphasized: "forms of the verbs, the time relation of the verbs, and the sense of the condition in each of the patterns" Kharama and Hajjaj (1997:140).

Motivated by the importance of counterfactuality and their types as a part of English Grammar in learning English as a foreign language, the study investigates areas of difficulty that Iraqi EFL university students face in identifying and producing hypothetical counterfactuality.

### Hypothetical Counterfactuality

In complicated sentences, there are two clauses; the main clause known as (q, or apodosis), and the subordinate clause known as (p, or the protasis). Conjunction is added to the subordinate clause that is the least marked of the English conditional conjunctions being (*if*) (Langacker, 1987: 35). Conditionals are a very important topic in Grammar as it is concerned with the fields of syntax and

semantics since they have been used as a testing ground for some of the most important theories, such as the principle of implicature in the philosophy of language.

### **Syntax of Hypothetical Counterfactuality**

In clauses of conditional sentences, verb forms are commonly seen as an important aspect of the overall conditional characterization. However, the interest of most analysts has focused on subjunctive and "counterfactual" phrases, where they signal the negative commitment of the speaker to the proposition. In the *if*-clauses and main clauses of conditional sentences, the forms of verb phrases used are usually seen as surface devices encoding primarily the condition type and the beliefs of the speaker. Not always unambiguous is their temporal reference, therefore the general temporal interpretation of conditional sentences obtained is based on other (like time adverbials) lexical indicators and the background. The key assumption to be taken into consideration is whether the conditionals use the verb forms in their own particular way or whether they are more efficiently described in terms of devices that usually available in the grammatical system (Dancygier 1999: 25).

Hypothetical counterfactuality expresses the form of verb that indicates the desire of what the speaker that not be fulfilled. In this connection, Quirk et al. (1985: 1010) argue that it is possible to find the same means of communicating hypothetical significance outside conditional sentences likewise. Thus, the gap is between several non-hypothetical forms, and a set of hypothetical forms with the latter appearing according to a certain sum in hypothetical conditionals pattern, and in other hypothetical buildings, such as this sentence, (*I wish I hadn't called, I'd rather you didn't call me 'honey'*).

Holes (1995: 238) asserts that the conditional sentences consist of two structurally separate clauses, the validity of one depending on the validity of the other, containing propositions. The proposition of the answering clause (the apodosis) can be considered valid only if the proposition in the conditional clause (the protasis) is realized. The connection between the two parts occurs whether the conditional statement describes events in a potential future world or the past or present, whether impossible or doubtful or when an unobtainable situation is assumed to have been realized, e.g. "*If they had lied on him, they would have lost him*". The temporal/modal sense of the verb in the conditional clause is often only interpretable with the aid of apodosis, as in phrases such as "*If they lied on him, they may/will have lost him*". In this example, the condition "*if they lied on him*" refers to a past world concerning that the speaker is unsure, instead of to some future unlikely world.

### **Semantics of Hypothetical Counterfactuality**

Semantically, clauses have a marginal function in the sentence, because they impute the primary proposition to the fact that the utterance is performed. The difficulty of expressing conditional sentences lies in the dependency of one situation on another's occurrence (Norris, 2003: 1). Conditionals express different interpretations according to the perspective of many writers. Saeed (2016:89) asserts that another ordinary language use of conditional *if-then* constructions is counterfactual, in which the speaker realizes the antecedent is false, for example:

1. *If I were an ostrich, then I would be a bird.*
2. *If I were an ostrich, then I would not be a bird.*

Sentence (1) *I am not an ostrich*, might be false. Yet in terms of conditional reasoning, it might seem to be true. The problem is that the presumption that the same antecedent in sentence (2) is false implies that this sentence must also be true. Even if it is accepted the less probable that the sentence (2) as true, it is disagreeable to try and keep both (1) and (2) in the same sense to be true for the same speaker. Some but not all elements of the use of *if-then* are captured by the logical relation of material inference in English.

Elaborately, Wu (2012: 38) asserts that conditionals have four kinds which are: zero conditionals, future, present and past conditionals. It is important to point that conditionals according to its meaning fall into one of the two wide categories, real conditionals and unreal conditionals. In the real conditionals, the antecedent part indicates a condition and the form of verb

in the consequent clause consists of three tenses; past, present, and future. In unreal conditionals, the antecedent refers to untrue condition, and unreal conditionals can be divided into two main types; counterfactual and hypothetical. Hypothetical includes the form of the verb "would" or (might, could, should) with the previous verb "have" plus the past-participle. Wu (2012) introduces the probability approach that classifies conditionals into four types in semantic relationship; factual conditionals, predicative conditionals, hypothetical conditionals and counterfactual conditionals. He explains the four types of conditionals according to their probability of understanding the incident in the consequent-clause. Hypothetical conditionals (*i.e. the second conditionals*) according to Wu (2012) is expressed when the incident in the consequence-clause is unbearable possible to occur when the condition in the if-clause is met. Hypothetical conditionals can be used to express wishes and desires that are unbearable to be understood as in these examples;

3. Had I enough money, I would buy another car.
4. If it rained tomorrow, they'd cancel the game.
5. If Mary were allergic to penicillin, she would have exactly the symptoms she is showing.
6. What if it rained last night? Everything would get wet.
7. If he had a cold last week, he wouldn't come to your talk.

## **Methodology**

Methodology involves three phases all procedures manipulated to construct the test; the method followed in data collection and data analysis, the sample of participants, the description of test, scoring scheme and the statistical tools used for eliciting data.

### **i- Method**

The study utilizes a mixed research method (quantitative and qualitative methods). Quantitative method is a descriptive/ explanatory method which indicates how its application has been successful to natural phenomena, and how the achievements from social phenomena could be obtained if it applies the same method (Cohen & Manion, 1980:25). Qualitative method is a method that concentrates on qualitative phenomenon which investigates the reasons for human behavior (why people do certain things) (Kothari, 2004:3). The study investigates the reasons behind errors committed by students and identifies the difficulties students face in handling counterfactuality. Data of the study represents ten conditional sentences collected from seven grammar books concerned with hypothetical counterfactuality.

The study utilizes a descriptive data brought about the test responses. Many steps have been conducted through choosing a sample for the pilot test and the main test, collecting valid, reliable, and practical data, then analyzing it through statistical tools presented in tables and charts. Describing data after the implementation of test is the most important step since it describes the errors in handling counterfactuality and the reasons behind these errors. Two models have been adopted in the present study; the first model is (Wu, 2012) that is made use of to build the test of the study. The second model is (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) used to analyze errors committed by students. Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005:51) describe error analysis as "a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learners' errors". Error analysis refers to the process which describes errors committed by learners in learning a foreign language. Error analysis plays a role in understanding important facts in language learning and in strengthening language pedagogy. It is useful to explain the problems of language that faced learners (Khansir, 2012 as cited by Natsir & Huri, 2016: 252).

### **ii- Sample**

The sample of the present study constitutes of 70 Iraqi EFL university students of the third stage, Mustansiriyah University, College of Arts, Department of English during the academic year 2020-2021. Twenty students are chosen for the pilot test, and fifty students for the main test. Selecting samples from the third stage is due to the fact that they receive three years of studying English grammar as well as about 8-10 years of formal teaching in English throughout their schooling until

their third stage at university. To ensure equalization among participants, certain variables among participants should be settled, the participants are of the same educational background and their ages ranged between 20-23 years. The participants are all native speakers of Iraqi Arabic, and they are homogeneous, as they have the same first language background and studying English language only as a foreign language.

### **iii- Test Description**

The test of the study consists of ten items presented in two questions; recognition question and production question. Recognition question consists of five hypothetical counterfactuality sentences. These sentences involve selecting the correct choices. In every sentence, a blank space takes the place of the missing correct answer. Under each sentence, multiple choices are numbered by letters containing the correct answers. Production question is the second question consisting of five hypothetical counterfactuality sentences. Under each sentence, there is a blank line for re-arranging them correctly. The instructions are typed on the first page of the test sheet, and students are asked to give some information about their gender, age, and their matrimonial status.

### **Validity**

The validity of test indicates how the test is to be efficient. It can be defined as "the degree to which a test measures what it claims, or purports to measure" (Brown, 1996: 231). Validity is a basic element for each specific use of a test, it is an explanation of data appearing from a specified procedure (Cronbach, 1971: 447). Validity refers to the degree of test user in which the test is capable of achieving definite aims. The test can be described as having validity since it has been submitted to the jury members interested in teaching EFL. The jury members have confirmed upon the appropriateness of data collection procedure of the test that is consistent with the aims of the study.

### **Reliability**

Test reliability can be defined as "the extent to which the results can be considered consistent or stable" Brown (1996: 196). Testing methods identified as stable and consistent are referred to as reliability. In order to estimate the reliability of test, the test-retest method, introduced by Harris (1969: 15), has been adopted supported by Kurder and Richardson's formula (KR-20) (1937: 151-160). The chosen twenty participants have been subjected to the test two times within four days, then the results shows that the value of correlation coefficient  $r = 0.88$  that is an acceptable reliability and the test reliability coefficient is (0.78) that is considered acceptable.

### **Pilot Test**

To investigate the validity and reliability of the test as well as the appropriateness of its items, a pilot study is taken before the implementation of the main test. It is conducted on a sample of (20) Iraqi EFL university students of the third stage (males and females) from Mustansiriyah University. They are asked to answer the questions whenever they need for. Some explanations about the purpose of test are given to the participants. The estimate total time that students have taken in answering the pilot study is 50 minutes. The purpose of the pilot test is to display two significant points; firstly, to check whether the students understand what they are required to do or they face any difficulty related to the test's structure; and secondly to know whether the test is suitable for the sample of students from the third stage.

### **Main Test**

One week after the implementation of the pilot study, the main test is carried out to a sample of fifty Iraqi EFL university students of the third stage (males and females) from Mustansiriyah University. The main test is conducted to fifty students from both classes (A and B) out of the total hundred students. Students are informed not to write their names on their sheet-papers to make them free from any constrains or any embarrassments. In addition, students are given one hour to answer the main test.

### **iv- Scoring Scheme**

A scoring scheme is designed to account for students' replies to the two questions (recognition and production). Frequencies, percentages and statistical devices are employed to identify areas of difficulty that students face in recognizing and producing hypothetical counterfactuality and to specify obstacles they encounter in solving problems. The scoring scheme has consisted of two parts; the scoring of recognition question consists of 5 items, each correct item is given one score, each incorrect item is given zero score. The scoring of production question consists of 5 items, each correct item is given two scores; half-correct item is given one score, and incorrect item is given zero score, the total scores of the production question are 10 scores.

### **Data Analysis**

Based on the review of the data collected, analyzing data involves description and analysis of the data collected from the students' replies to main test (recognition and production) questions. It also involves description of the grammatical errors committed by students.

### **Recognition Part**

The answers of sample have collected for hypothetical counterfactuality as correct or incorrect. Then, statistical analysis has been conducted to account for the numbers and percentages of correct or incorrect answers of both recognition and production questions. The percentage of each item is calculated as the total number of students who answered correct/incorrect and the percentage of the final scores with an explanation of the reasons behind correct/incorrect answers. In the hypothetical counterfactuality, the incident in the consequence-clause is unbearable possible to occur when the condition in the if-clause is met, it can be used to express wishes and desires that are unbearable to be understood (Wu, 2012:38). Hypothetical counterfactuality includes five conditional sentences (1-5) that are used in recognition question as in the following:

#### **1. *I wish I hadn't called, I would rather you didn't call me 'honey'.***

70% of the students have answered sentence (1) incorrectly as they choose the modal *could* instead of *would*. Students are not able to recognize this sentence as conditional due to the use of *wish* instead of the condition *if*. Students' failure may be attributed to their misunderstanding of the complex structure of *wish* in the past perfect.

#### **2. *John wouldn't have passed if he had written the exam.***

Sentence (2) scores 90% of the incorrect answers. It seems that the problem lies in their inability to recognize the tense of the verb, consequently their choices of the form of the verb are incorrect. The verb form in this sentence is used to indicate an imaginary situation, the things that will probably not happen (Swan, 1995: 247).

#### **3. *What if it rained last night? Everything would get wet.***

#### **4. *If he had a cold last week, he couldn't come to your talk.***

32 students (64%) have answered both sentences (3 and 4) incorrectly. This means that students find difficulty in choosing the correct form of the verb when it comes with the two modals (*would*) and (*could*) respectively. This is due to the fact that students cannot usually distinguish between the past tense and the past perfect in conditional sentences. They mismatch the verb forms in the two main clauses of the conditionals. It seems that past perfect tense is an obstacle for them in handling conditional sentences.

#### **5. *If wishes were money, then we would all be rich.***

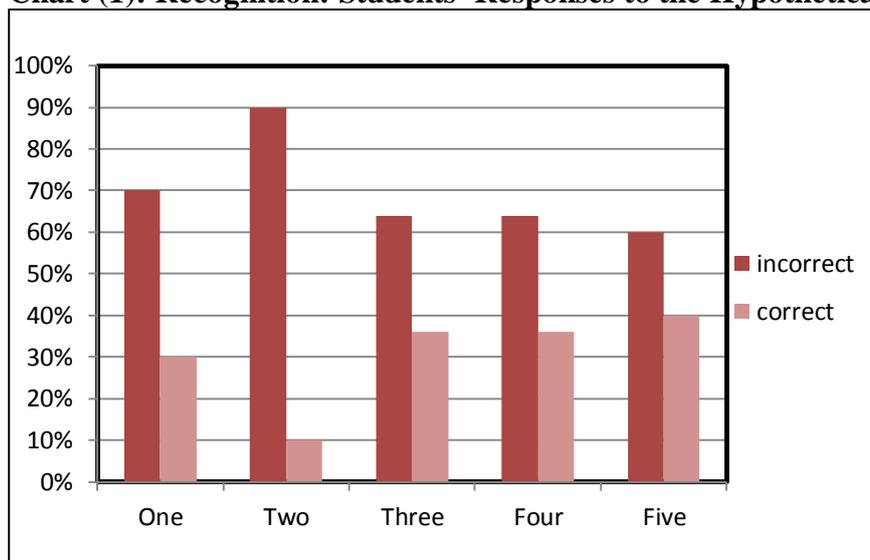
Only 20 students (40%) are able to give the right answer (*would all be*). Students mostly overlook the hypothetical sense and hence they fail to give the correct form. This idea is asserted by Comrie (1986:94) that "*back-shifting*" is especially used for unreal conditions in which tense and verb forms have a relationship in conditionals that would make the case more difficult. It is defined as "the use of morphologically past tense with present (or future) time reference and pluperfect with past time reference".

Table (1) and chart (1) show the numbers and percentages of the students who have identified the hypothetical type of conditionals as correct/incorrect.

**Table (1): Recognition Students' Responses to the Hypothetical Counterfactuality**

| No.          | Correct Answers | Percentage   | Incorrect Answers | Percentage   |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
| 1.           | 15              | 30%          | 35                | 70%          |
| 2.           | 5               | 10%          | 45                | 90%          |
| 3.           | 18              | 36%          | 32                | 64%          |
| 4.           | 18              | 36%          | 32                | 64%          |
| 5.           | 20              | 40%          | 30                | 60%          |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>76</b>       | <b>30.4%</b> | <b>174</b>        | <b>69.6%</b> |

**Chart (1): Recognition: Students' Responses to the Hypothetical Counterfactuality**



### Production Part

The percentage of each item in the production question is calculated as the total number of students who have answered correct/incorrect and the percentage of the final scores with an explanation of the reasons behind correct/incorrect answers. Hypothetical counterfactuality includes five conditional sentences (1-5) as in the following:

**1. *I wish I had known you were in trouble. Then, I could have helped you.***

45 students (90%) have produced sentence (1) incorrectly. This sentence is more complicated for students for two reasons; the first reason is due to the use of past perfect with wish-clause. The second reason is due to the use of "then" in the main clause. In English grammar, *past perfect* is used after *wish* when someone shows regret to something that happened or it did not happen in the past (Murphy, 2000: 72). Students have misunderstood the semantic element of conditional sentences, therefore, they mostly commit errors in producing this structure.

**2. *It would be nice if you hadn't said that.***

10 students (20%) have answered sentence (2) correctly while 40 students (80%) have answered it incorrectly. Students mostly do not realize that this sentence by its nature refers to wishes that are not fulfilled. Swan (1995:601) asserts that this sentence is equal to the sentence like (*I wish you hadn't said that*) since past perfect tenses are used for wishes about the past.

**3. *Had I enough money, I would buy another car.***

Sentence (3) scores 86% of incorrect answers while it scores 14% of correct answers. Most students have faced difficulty in producing this sentence since the use of "had" instead of "if" may make this sentence more complicated for them. The use of "had" instead of "if" indicates wishes about the past, this sentence is equal to the sentence (*I wish I had enough money*). Most students have realized the verb "had" as a main verb that comes after the subject while it expresses wishes that are not fulfilled.

**4. *If Mary came tomorrow, she would get a shock.***

48 students (96%) have produced sentence (4) incorrectly. Students do not understand the temporal references in this sentence that are past, present, and future. Athanasiadou and Dirven (1997 :124) assert that past tense in this sentence is used to indicate future since the use of *would* in the main clause activates the use of the past verbal form in English; the past tense in the if-clause has a temporal reference that is contextually neutral between past, present, and future.

**5. *If I were your mother, I would give you a good thrashing.***

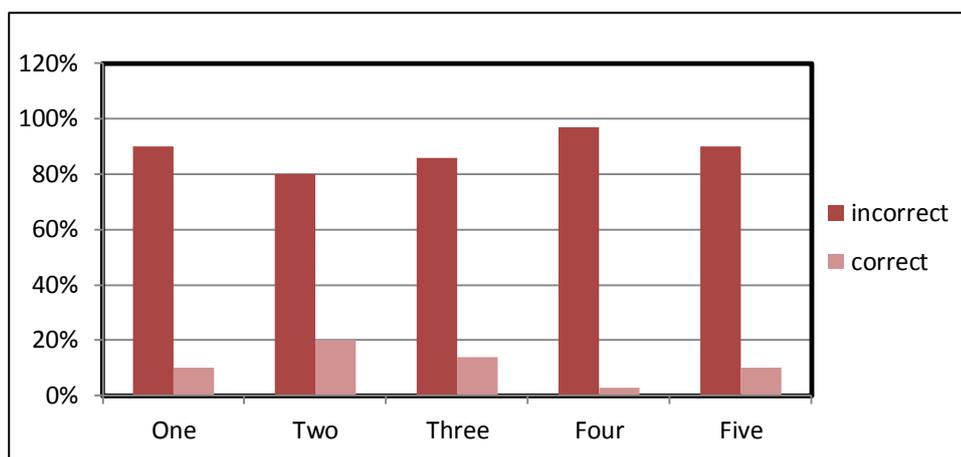
5 students (10%) only have answered sentence (5) correctly while 45 students (90%) have answered it incorrectly. It seems that students do not understand the interpretation of the hypothetical type in this sentence. Hypothetical conditionals can be basically expressed in future tense or present tense; this indicates a negative belief of the speaker. This sentence does not express the moment of speech since it contains explicit information about the time not being "now", and hence the verb is typically understood as present (Dancygier, 1999 :31).

Table (2) and chart (2) show the numbers and percentages of the students who have produced the hypothetical counterfactuality as correct/incorrect. Chart (3) shows average scores of students in the recognition and production questions as in the following:

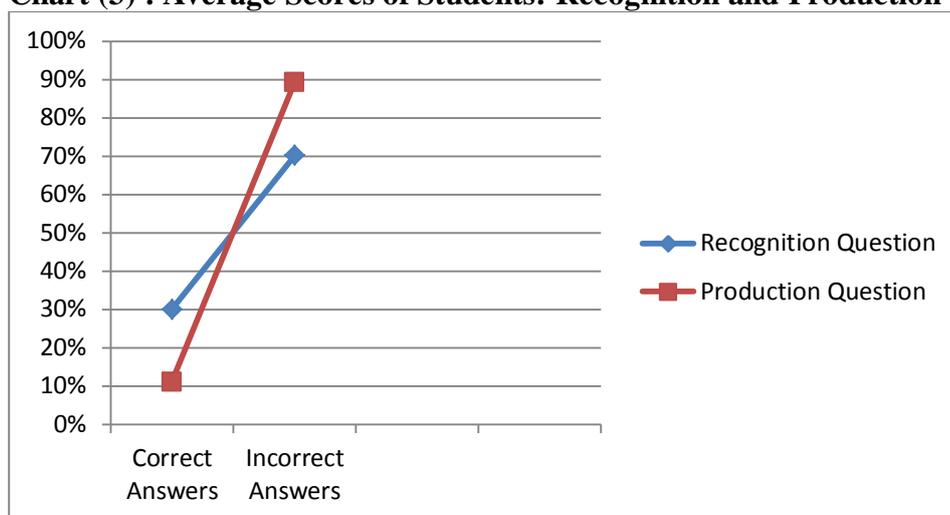
**Table (2): Production: Students' Responses to the Hypothetical Counterfactuality**

| No.          | Correct Answers | Percentage   | Incorrect Answers | Percentage   |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
| 1.           | 5               | 10%          | 45                | 90%          |
| 2.           | 10              | 20%          | 40                | 80%          |
| 3.           | 7               | 14%          | 43                | 86%          |
| 4.           | 2               | 4%           | 48                | 96%          |
| 5.           | 5               | 10%          | 45                | 90%          |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>29</b>       | <b>11.6%</b> | <b>221</b>        | <b>88.4%</b> |

**Chart (2): Production: Students' Responses to the Hypothetical Counterfactuality**



**Chart (3) : Average Scores of Students: Recognition and Production**



## Results

The overall scores of the correct answers and the percentages of incorrect answerers of the hypothetical counterfactual in the recognition question are 30.4% for correct answers and 69.6% for incorrect answers. Errors committed by students in this question are in choosing the incorrect modal verbs as they cannot be recognized the conditional sentence without the condition *if*. Although *if*- and *wish*-clauses are separate structures, they are related since *wish*-clause occasionally function like *if*-clauses. Students have also committed errors in choosing the incorrect verb tense and verb form. Students have not distinguished between the past tense and the past perfect in conditional sentences, the past perfect tense is considered the greatest obstacle for them in handling hypothetical counterfactuality. The overall percentages of correct answers and the overall percentages of incorrect answers for the hypothetical counterfactual in the production question are 11.4% for correct answers and 88.6% for incorrect answers. Errors committed by students in this question are in the verb tense (past perfect tense in *wish*-clauses), word order, punctuation, and spelling. Quirk et al (1985: 1088-97) assert that hypothetical condition is conveyed the speaker's belief that the condition is not fulfilled as realized by simple past or past perfect. It obviously that the incorrect answers for students in the production question is greater than in the recognition question, this proves that the production of hypothetical counterfactuality is the most difficult for students than the recognition of it.

## Conclusion

The study affirms that Iraqi EFL university students have faced difficulties in handling hypothetical counterfactuality, this difficulties are due to the grammar books that have not covered it syntactically and semantically. The reason behind errors committed by student that they have not practiced the forms and meanings of hypothetical counterfactuality as much as possible in grammar

books. In recognizing and producing the hypothetical counterfactuality, students have not understood it syntactically and semantically:

Syntactically; students have not understood past perfect correctly and they do not recognize the right form of the verbs in the two clauses. Most of students tend to create deviant structures that have no relevance to the target language. The proposition of answering clause can be considered valid only if the proposition in the conditional clause is realized (Holes, 1995: 238).

Semantically, students have a problems in handling the semantic elements that connect between the two clauses. Clauses have a marginal function in the sentence, because they impute the primary proposition to the fact that the utterance is performed. The difficulty of expressing conditional sentences lies in the dependency of one situation on another's occurrence (Norris, 2003:1).

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**Appendix**

**Q1/ Fill in the blanks with correct choices**

1. I wish I hadn't called, I.....you didn't call me 'honey'.  
**a. will rather    b. would rather    c. could rather    d. should rather**
2. John..... if he had written the exam.  
**a. will not pass                    b. wouldn't have passed                    c. wouldn't have pass**  
**d. couldn't have passed**
3. What if it rained last night? Everything ..... wet.  
**a. would have get    b. had get    c. would get    d. would got**
4. If he had a cold last week, he ..... to your talk.  
**a. wouldn't came    b. couldn't come    c. couldn't came    d. can't come**
5. If wishes were money, then we..... all be rich.  
**a. would                    b. should                    c. can                    d. may**

**Q2/ Re-arrange the following sentences correctly**

1. I / wish / in trouble /Then / I / could have / known you / I / had / were / helped you  
 -----
2. It / you hadn't / would / if / said that / be nice  
 -----
3. I / buy / I / would / had / another car/ enough money  
 -----
4. Mary/ would get / came/ tomorrow / she/ If / a shock  
 -----
5. If / your mother / I / you / I were/ a good thrashing /would give  
 -----