

A Corpus-based Study on the Use of English Present Perfect by Chinese EFL Learners*

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Yi, Liu. (2016). A Corpus-based Study on the Use of English Present Perfect by Chinese EFL Learners. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 24(2), 41-55. Through the comparison of the corpora of LOCNESS and CLEC, this study examines Chinese EFL learners' unique features in using English present perfect. It shows that Chinese learners are more obsessed with using resultative perfect compared with native speakers ($p < .05$). And Chinese learners use more experiential perfect along with their rising English proficiency, and there is a huge gap between different proficient learners ($p < .05$). With respect to persistent and recent perfect, both native and non-native speakers marginally used them. Chinese learners' performance may be influenced by many factors such as L1/L2 interference, typicality of target language, learners' different English proficiency, and learners' avoidance of using target language, and so on. This study hopes to provide some implications to the EFL teaching.

Key words: LOCNESS, CLEC, present perfect, English proficiency

1. Introduction

The meaning of present perfect (also called perfect) is composed of its past and present components. As Leech (1971:30) claimed that present perfect is "past-time-related-to-present-time". To put it in another way, perfect is a grammatical category describing an action or a state that happened in the past

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time but related to the current situation.

However, since both the present perfect and past tense are able to describe a past-time action, it would be a potential difficulty for EFL learners to acquire present perfect especially for those whose mother languages are lack of perfect. Although scholars like McCawley (1971) and McCoard (1978) pointed out the feature of 'relevance to current situation' of present perfect can be used to distinguish it from other tense/aspect, the perfect is still a difficulty for EFL learners, which has been demonstrated by many studies (Coppieters, 1987; Flashner, 1989; Hinkel, 2004). But most previous studies about the EFL learners acquiring English present perfect have focused on revealing learners' errors (Labadi, 1990; Hantrakuil, 1990; Hu, 2010). There are rare studies about investigating learners' correct output of present perfect, moreover, in order to examine learners' interlanguage features, both correct and incorrect production should be analyzed (Ellis, 1985). Hence, in this study, the EFL learners' correct production of English present perfect are paid more attention, which may provide us a different view on examining learners' interlanguage.

In the current study, an English native speaker corpus of LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays) and a non-native speaker corpus of CLEC (Chinese Learners of English Corpus) are adopted to investigate the similarity and difference in using English present perfect by each of them. Moreover, we will focus on how the learners use different kinds of perfect, and which usage of present perfect is most widely used by the learners and which is the least one. And we also examine whether the different English proficiency affects learners using the present perfect. In addition, both the sameness and difference would be analyzed to look for a proper explanation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Classification of English Present Perfect

Leech (1971) put forward three different usages of present perfect: state/habit-up-to-the-date, resultative perfect and indefinite perfect. And McCawley (1971) defined three interpretations of English present perfect as

continuative, resultative and experiential perfect. Actually there is a large overlap between Leech and McCawley's classifications on different usages of English present perfect. Later, Comrie (1976) summarized and classified English present perfect as four subparts: perfect of result, experiential perfect, perfect of persistent situation and perfect of recent past. As Comrie's classification is more inclusive and widely accepted, in this study we will follow Comrie's view to study how well Chinese EFL students acquired the four different usages of English present perfect. And (1)-(4) illustrate these four uses:

- (1) ...the world as a body of people living in close proximity has rapidly shrunk. [AmE essays from LOCNESS] (Resultative)
- (2) The French have never had much respect for the prevailing constitution. [BrE essays from LOCNESS] (Experiential)
- (3) Although people have struggled for equality for quite a long time... [CLEC-ST6] (Persistent)
- (4) I have just graduated from the university of Jian Nan. [CLEC-ST3] (Recent)

2.2 Early studies on the acquisition of English Present Perfect by EFL learners

2.2.1 The Influence of L1/ L2 on acquiring English Present Perfect

Collins (2002) has reported that French-speaking learners have acquired English perfect under the influence of their mother tongue: French *passé composé*. Cai (2010) examined 120 Chinese university students' English writings and found Chinese aspect marker *le* (了) has a greater influence on their acquiring English simple past than present perfect, though *le* (了) can also convey the experiential use of present perfect.

Liu (2009) has investigated the feature of Chinese bilinguals' use of English present perfect. He compared two groups of English learners: Korean-Chinese bilinguals and Chinese monolinguals. After examining the learners' English tests and questionnaires, he concluded that bilingual students acquired and used English perfect better than monolinguals which may due to their dual

positive transfer during English learning.

However, Bao & Jin (2010) have demonstrated a different finding about bilinguals' English acquisition. They have examined Mongolian-Chinese bilinguals' English present perfect acquisition, and argued that Mongolian language plays a negative role. Because there is no present perfect grammatical category in Mongolian, learners tend to understand English present perfect with the help of Mongolian past tense which leads to their overuse on English past tense.

2.2.2 Misuses of English Present Perfect

Montrul (2009) sustains that Spanish heritage speakers have the difficulty in distinguishing the form and meaning of English preterit-imperfect differences, which results in their misuse of English present perfect. And Gu & Wang (2005) investigated 91 form errors from 1,078 present perfect sentences based on the corpus of CLEC, and they sustain the linguistic factors including verb salience and temporal adverb attribute to learners' misuse. Han (2006) found that Chinese students are better in acquiring the form of English present perfect rather than the meaning, and they often misuse it for simple past tense or past perfect. Similarly, Hu (2010) and Duan (2011) also conclude that Chinese learners easily misuse present perfect in different contexts.

2.3 Limitations of Previous Research

The previous studies about EFL learners' English present perfect acquisition have largely focused on L1/L2 influence and learners' misuse, and both of them are closely connected to learners' errors. In other words, former studies emphasized on revealing learners' incorrect language production and analyzing the potential reasons. However, they failed to consider the correct output by learners, and in order to get a whole picture of learners' language acquisition, both the incorrect and correct output should be taken into consideration (Ellis, 1985). Therefore, in this study, the learners' correct outputs of English present perfect are examined.

Besides, almost all the previous studies have failed to investigate different

usages of English present perfect. In the present study, four different usages of perfect will be examined from the corpora of LOCNESS and CLEC.

In addition, most of the former researches have compared the performance of native speakers and EFL learners, but few of them include different proficient EFL learners. In order to check whether English proficiency would affect learners' interlanguage, both EFL intermediate and advanced learners' corpora are examined in this study.

2.4 Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, this study is aiming to examine:

(i) How frequently the native speakers and Chinese learners use English present perfect in argumentative essays;

(ii) Whether the using frequency of four different usages of English perfect are equally distributed among different group of language users. To put it in another way, among four different usages of English present perfect, do native speakers, intermediate-level learners and advanced learners use English perfect in the same way?

(iii) Whether different language proficiency influences language users' using English perfect.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Corpora Used for the Study

The present study is based on two corpora: LOCNESS and CLEC. LOCNESS is made up of 168,400 words of essays by American university students, 95,695 words of argumentative and literary essays by British university students, and 60,209 words of essays by British high school students (Granger, 1998). CLEC contains one million words of English compositions collected from Chinese learners of English with differing levels of proficiency: College Entrance Exam (ST2), College English Test-Band 4 (ST3), College English Test-Band 6 (ST4), Test for English Majors – Band 4(ST5), and Test for English Majors – Band 8(ST6).

In this study, only university students' writings are enrolled from both native and non-native speakers. Besides, intermediate and advanced level of Chinese learners' writings are also included. Hence, there are three subsets of corpora to be analyzed: essays from American and British university students (LOCNESS), CLEC-ST3, and CLEC-ST6. The overall description of those corpora is shown below.

Table 1. Description of LOCNESS and CLEC

Corpora	CLEC (ST-3)	CLEC (ST-6)	LOCNESS
Type of texts	argumentative essays	argumentative essays	argumentative essays
Setting	timed	50%timed+50%untimed	90% timed + 10% untimed
Years	2003	2003	1991, 1995
Learner type	EFL	EFL	ENL
Level of learners	Non-English major university students; intermediate-learner	English major university students; advanced-learner	Native American and British university students; native speaker
Number of topics	176	62	98
Form of topics	paragraph	paragraph	phrases
Number of texts	1,322	396	320
Mean length of texts	158	571	825
Total number of tokens	209,043	226,106	264,059

From table 1, we can see that several conditions guarantee this comparative study to be carried on. First, all the writings are argumentative essays, which are from university students aging from 18-23. Second, all the three subsets of corpora CLEC-ST3, CLEC-ST6 and LOCNESS are made up of various topics. Third, all the three corpora are comparable in size, with the smallest of 209,043

tokens and largest 264,059 tokens.

3.2 Software Used for the Study and their Operating Steps

The software of WordSmith (WS) tools of version 6.0 are applied in the present study. First of all, the Concord function of WS is used, and the search words of '*have/has/ve/s*' are put in for finding out the entries of present perfect. However, some other grammatical items have been picked out besides the present perfect. For example, *have/has* can be used as a nominal verb, or an infinitive *have to* and even used in subjunctive mood.

After manually deleting the improper entries, all the entries of present perfect is left, which are subdivided into four groups according to different usages of present perfect: resultative, experiential, persistent and recent perfect.

The second software used in this study is SPSS 18.0, which is applied to calculate the occurrence frequency of present perfect in each corpus. And the functions of crosstabs and chi-square test are also used to check whether there is any statistical significance appearing among different corpora.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 The Overall Occurrence Frequency of English Present Perfect

In order to make a comparison of the use of present perfect between the LOCNESS and the CLEC (ST3, ST6), it is necessary to figure out the occurrence frequency of perfect in each corpus. And by making an application of the WS tools and manual editing, the result is shown in table 2.

Table 2. The overall occurrence frequency of present perfect

Corpus	Present perfect	Sentences	Percentage (%)
CLEC (ST3)	641	16084	3.9853
CLEC (ST6)	1045	13354	7.8253
LOCNESS	1429	14333	9.9699

As is shown above, the using frequency of present perfect is going up along with the students' rising English proficiency, with native speakers using the perfect most and intermediate-level students (ST3) using the least.

However, in corpus linguistics, the above figures are called raw statistics, which should be normalized for comparative study (McEnery, et al., 2006:53). Hence, the above original figures should be normalized by the following formula.

$$\text{Standard Frequency} = \frac{\text{present perfect sentences}}{\text{total sentences}} \times 10,000$$

(Quoted from Yang, 2013:100)

After calculation, the overall normalized frequency of present perfect in each corpus is that 3985 (CLEC-ST3), 7825 (CLEC-ST4), and 9970 (LOCNESS). And they are better shown in figure 1. Then we apply SPSS to do the Chi-square test to get table 3.

Figure 1. The Normalized Frequency

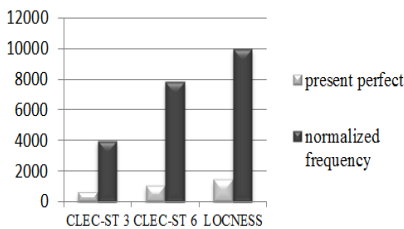


Table 3. Occurrence Frequency of Present Perfect

	value	df	Asym.Sig (2-sided)
ST3&ST6	199.266 ^a	1	.000-
ST3 & LOCNESS	428.007 ^a	1	.000-
ST6 & LOCNESS	39.075 ^a	1	.000-

From the above analysis, we can conclude that native speakers use present perfect much more often than Chinese EFL learners, and the difference is significant ($p=.000<0.05$). Besides, the significant difference does also exist between ST3 and ST6 learners. And the advanced ST6 learners use present perfect almost twice as much as the intermediate ST3 learners. In general, learners use more present perfect as their rising English proficiency.

In addition, the entries of present perfect would be subdivided according to their different usages, and the distributions of each usage of present perfect across corpora are shown in table 4.

Table 4. Different usages of the Perfect across corpora

Use Corpora	Resultative (%)	Experiential (%)	Persistent (%)	Recent (%)	Total (%)
CLEC-ST3	409 (63.81%)	110 (17.16%)	72 (11.23%)	50 (7.80%)	641 (100%)
CLEC-ST6	510 (48.80%)	260 (24.88%)	158 (15.12%)	117 (11.20%)	1045 (100%)
LOCNESS	633 (44.30%)	544 (38.06%)	175 (12.25%)	77 (5.39%)	1429 (100%)

As is shown in table 4, the ranking order of occurrence frequency about different usages of present perfect is similar across different corpora: Resultative > Experiential > Persistent > Recent. It proves that learners regardless of their proficiency have the similar tendency of using present perfect, with resultative perfect as the most used one, and the recent result is the least. However, we should further analyze each usage in detail to draw an inclusive conclusion.

4.2 The Occurrence Frequency of Resultative Perfect

As is presented in table 4, the resultative perfect is the most frequently used perfect in all the three corpora. And there seems to be a tendency that with the higher English proficiency of learners, the less likely they are to use resultative perfect. Thus, we further applied SPSS software to examine whether this tendency is significantly different across those three corpora. We carried out a 2×2 Chi-square test to check the sameness of each two of three corpora, and the result is shown in table 5.

Table 5. The comparison of occurrence frequency about resultative perfect

	value	df	Asym.Sig (2-sided)
CLEC (ST3) & (ST6)	4.577 ^a	1	.032 *
CLEC (ST3) & LOCNESS	8.052 ^a	1	.005 **
CLEC (ST6) & LOCNESS	.502 ^a	1	.478

From the above table, we can conclude that intermediate learners use the

resultative perfect significant more frequently than advanced learners ($p=.032<0.05$), and this huge gap also occurs when intermediate learners compare with native speakers ($p=.005<0.05$). However, there is no such difference between advanced learners and native speakers ($p=.478>0.05$).

From the above analyzing result, we can make at least three conclusions. First, intermediate learners seem to be obsessed with using resultative perfect than other proficient learners. Second, not only the intermediate learners but all the proficient learners are using resultative perfect most, rather than other usages of perfect. In other words, resultative perfect occupies a predominant position throughout all the different corpora. Third, as learners' English proficiency goes up, they use resultative perfect less and less, and they seem to begin to use other usages of perfect as well.

Perhaps the following two reasons can explain why intermediate learners favor resultative perfect. First, resultative perfect is indeed widely used in authentic world, as we have seen in native speaker's corpus of LOCNESS. In that case, we may say during EFL learners acquire present perfect, they might have been overwhelmingly surrounded by resultative present, hence they acquired this usage earlier and retained better than other usages. Thus, they use resultative perfect more often than other perfects. Second, as we have mentioned at the beginning of this paper, English present perfect is used to convey a concept 'a past-time event has some effect on the current situation'. Within this framework, perhaps resultative perfect is the most typical usage of present perfect, since the resultative perfect is used to express the resultant state of a past event. Therefore, once the learners produce a present perfect sentence, the usage of resultative perfect would be their first choice.

4.3 The Occurrence Frequency of Experiential Perfect

As is shown in table 4, the usage of experiential perfect takes the second ranking of occurrence frequency across all the three corpora. But the native speakers use experiential perfect much more often than other learners, and we also operate the SPSS to figure out whether the difference is significant. The method of calculating resultative present is replicated to work out the using frequency of experiential perfect.

Table 6. The comparison of occurrence frequency about experiential perfect

	value	df	Asym.Sig (2-sided)
CLEC (ST3) & (ST6)	1.929 ^a	1	.165
CLEC (ST3) & LOCNESS	11.060 ^a	1	.001 **
CLEC (ST6) & LOCNESS	3.916 ^a	1	.048 *

The results show that there is no significant difference between intermediate and advanced Chinese learners in using experiential perfect ($p=.165>0.05$), but the difference appear between intermediate learners and native speakers ($p=.001<0.05$) as well as between advanced learners and native speakers ($p=.048<0.05$). And there is a tendency that learners use more experiential perfect along with their rising English proficiency.

There may be two reasons that can account for the above occurrence frequency. First, Chinese language may hinder Chinese EFL learners from using the experiential perfect. Chinese aspect marker *le* (了) has a closer relationship with English simple past rather than present perfect (Cai, 2010), thus any English sentence that can be translated to Chinese *le* (了) sentence is likely to be used as a simple past rather than present perfect. However, *le* (了) is better used as an experiential perfect sometimes. For example:

- (5) A huge stone in my heart was taken away, when I made up my missing lessons... [CLEC-ST3]
- (6) Because the crime she committed had caused a lot of trouble to a child and great damage to the society. [CLEC-ST6]

The underlined verbs in the above examples are both simple past tense, where the present perfect should have been used. In the example of (5), 'making up the missing lessons' is actually a complete action, which is always expressed by Chinese *le* (了) that corresponds to Chinese simple past tense. Hence, learners may be influenced by their mother language and expressed a simple past sentence in English. The same as in (14), the past action 'commit a crime' is a complete action, which is usually conveyed by Chinese aspect marker *le* (了). And because *le* (了) is significantly associated with English simple past, which prevents learners from using present perfect.

Second, learners sometimes avoid errors in their writings in order to make their production correct (Ellis, 1985). And Chinese learners may avoid using experiential perfect because of their less confidence about target language. After learners get confidence about using experiential perfect, they begin to use it. And learners always keep gaining their self-confidence along with the rising English proficiency. This may explain why learners use more and more experiential perfect with the pace of rising English proficiency.

4.4 The Occurrence Frequency of Persistent Perfect

The calculation method of occurrence frequency of persistent perfect is the same as that of resultative and experiential perfect. As the table 4 shows, the using frequencies of persistent result across different corpora are in the same level (around 11%~15%). And the Chi-Square test of SPSS also shows that none of the either two corpora has significant difference in using frequency of persistent perfect.

Table 7. The comparison of occurrence frequency about persistent perfect

	value	df	Asym.Sig (2-sided)
CLEC (ST3) & (ST6)	.707 ^a	1	.400
CLEC (ST3) & LOCNESS	.049 ^a	1	.825
CLEC (ST6) & LOCNESS	.385 ^a	1	.535

Unlike the resultative and experiential perfect, persistent result is marginally used in all the three corpora. And it perhaps dues to the reason that English persistent perfect is the same as English present progressive perfect in conveying meanings. For example,

- (7) Although people have been struggling for quite a long time... (from CLEC-ST6)
- (8) Although people have struggled for quite a long time...

Learners are likely to use present progressive perfect (like example 7) to express continuous meaning rather than using experiential perfect. Hence, there are less experiential perfect being applied by all the three level speakers.

4.5 The Occurrence Frequency of Recent Perfect

Among all the four usages of present perfect, the recent perfect is least used in all the three corpora. And according to the following table 8, we found that Chinese EFL learners are using more recent perfect than native speakers. But according to the Chi-square test of SPSS, no significant difference appears in using recent perfect among three corpora.

Table 8. The comparison of occurrence frequency about recent perfect

	value	df	Asym.Sig (2-sided)
CLEC (ST3) & (ST6)	.523 ^a	1	.469
CLEC (ST3) & LOCNESS	.740 ^a	1	.390
CLEC (ST6) & LOCNESS	2.446 ^a	1	.118

5. Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can see that native speakers use English present perfect significantly more than Chinese EFL learners. But in some specific usage of present perfect, Chinese learners use it more than native speakers, such as resultative perfect and recent perfect.

Besides, this study also compares different proficient EFL learners, and the results show that they use fewer and fewer resultative perfect as their rising English proficiency. And the difference between ST-3 and ST-6 learners is significant ($p < .05$). On the contrary, they use more and more experiential perfect along with their improving English proficiency, and the difference is also significant ($p < .05$). As for the persistent perfect and recent perfect, which are marginally used across all the three corpora, and there is no significant difference among them.

However, this study only counts on argumentative essays, thus the result might not be inclusive. If other types of writings are also included, the conclusion would be more general. Moreover, this study is limited in revealing the underlying reasons why the EFL learners misuse or less use the target language, which needs to be studied in further research.

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