

Developmental Errors in Chinese L1 Speakers' Use of the L2 English Past Tense and Perfective Aspect

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Li, Aijing & Choe, Mun-Hong. (2017). **Developmental Errors in Chinese L1 Speakers' Use of the L2 English Past Tense and Perfective Aspect.** *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 25(1), 29-53. This study investigated intermediate-level Chinese EFL learners' ability to use three tense-aspect categories in English: simple past, present perfect, and past perfect. Participants (N = 142) were asked to complete three types of controlled tasks: multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and translation, and then to provide an explanation for their answers through group discussions. The findings indicate that although the learners were well acquainted with the tense-aspect forms, they were not able to use them appropriately; past perfect was the most difficult category for both low-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners; they tended to overuse the simple past form when describing events that occurred in the past but their influence has lasted to the present; they often used the present perfect form in sentences containing definite temporal adverbials; and finally, they applied the perfective aspect to the verbs whose lexical aspects import punctuality. These lead to the conclusion that Chinese EFL learners are disposed to rely on L1 translation, tense-aspect consistency in adjacent discourse, and local lexical cues such as temporal adverbials in order to facilitate their understanding of the intricate usage of the English tense-aspect system.

Key Words: Chinese, EFL, simple past, present perfect, past perfect

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I. Introduction

Tense and aspect refer to a set of grammatical concepts that serve the function of locating events in time. In the tradition of formal linguistics, they are viewed as semantic operators or functions ranging over propositions and denoting a point in time or a span of time at which the proposition can be allocated a truth-value (Hackmack, 2007). Research shows that the concepts and forms associated with time present a complexity for language learners, and non-native (L2) speakers' intuitions regarding morphological references to deictic temporality may not be fully developed despite years of training (Hinkel, 1992; Pancheva & Stechow, 2004). Although L2 learners are exposed to enormous input of the tenses and aspects of the target language from a very early stage of learning, their ability to discern and utilize them seems not to be stabilized early in development.

The notional distinctions between simple past, present perfect, and past perfect are conventionally explained in Chinese EFL classrooms as follows (cf. Yang & Huang, 2004): Simple past talks about an event that happened and ended in the past and has no relationship to the present, whereas present perfect describes an event that happened in the past with its state or effect lasting to the present utterance time. Past perfect expresses the idea that a certain event occurred and was completed before a specific reference time in the past. Another widely cited explanation is that simple past is used when something happened at a specific time in the past, so it can be modified by definite temporal adverbials. On the contrary, present perfect is adopted when talking about an event that happened at an indefinite time or something repeated as an ongoing habit from the past to the present, and thus it cannot be modified by definite temporal adverbials. Instead, indefinite adverbials such as *since*, *already*, and *for* are used in perfective sentences.

The Chinese tense-aspect system differs greatly from that of English. Although there has been a volume of research into L2 learners' acquisition of the English tense-aspect system (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1992, 1998; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Salaberry & Shirai, 2002), few have dealt with simple past, present perfect, and past perfect together. The present study sets out to examine intermediate-level Chinese EFL learners' ability to discriminate the

forms and meanings of the three grammatical categories. The goal is to identify the pervasive problems in their comprehension and production of the tenses and aspects in question, and further to classify the error types with regard to their development in proficiency.

II. Background of the Study

1. The Semantics of Tense and Aspect

Tense functions as a temporal deixis, which serves to locate the time of an event being talked about from the time at which the speaker utters the sentence (Yuan, 2005). Tense encompasses two aspects: a morphological aspect, which refers to a system of tenses encoded in the verb's morphology, and a semantic aspect, which refers to the temporal location of the event or events depicted in one or more sentences. According to Hackmack (2007), in a strict sense, tense only comprises two values: past or non-past. Aspect is another grammatical category of verbal temporality. It has more to do with the temporal structure of the event or situation itself. Distinct from tense, it describes a situation as being ongoing or completed. The concept of aspect is further distinguished into two types: grammatical aspect and lexical aspect. Grammatical aspect, or viewpoint aspect in Smith (1983), is expressed explicitly through grammatical morphemes such as auxiliaries (i.e., *be*, *have*) and verb inflections (i.e., *-ed*, *-ing*). Lexical aspect refers to the semantic characteristics that are inherent in a particular lexical item independently of any grammatical marking or time frame. As pointed out by Robinson (1995), lexical aspect resides in the sense of a predicate, not in its reference or in an isolated verb.

The relationships between simple past, present perfect and past perfect in English are intricate, as they all contain pastness as part of their meaning. For example, the present perfect in (1) expresses anteriority.

(1) Mary has visited China.

This sentence asserts that there is an eventuality of Mary's visiting China that

occurred before the utterance time. This common characterization brings present perfect close to the meaning of simple past, and for this reason the two have been discussed extensively in opposition to each other (Iatridou, Anagnostopoulou, & Lzorski, 2001; McCoard, 1978, among others). While both simple past and present perfect express temporal precedence, it has been claimed that they do so in different ways. According to Katz (2003), in contrast to simple past sentences, present perfect sentences are used when the occurrence of the past event is somehow relevant to present concerns. Although both (2a) and (2b) talk about an event that occurred in the past, (2a) indicates that Amy is still at the party whereas (2b) does not imply the meaning.

- (2) a. John has gone to the party.
b. John went to the party.

Klein's (1992) theory of present perfect puzzle makes a direct comparison between simple past and present perfect. He points out that in contrast to simple past sentences, present perfect sentences cannot felicitously be modified by past time adverbials.

- (3) a.*Amy has gone to the party last week.
b. Amy went to the party last week.

Despite the fact that present perfect sentences are used to speak about a past event, they cannot be embellished with a temporal adverbial to locate this event more specifically in time. Katz (2003) also argues that present perfect takes an event predicate as its complement and introduces the presupposition that it is possible for this event to hold at a time after the time of speech. Because an event predicate can only hold in the past when modified by a preterit adverbial, such modification will necessarily violate this presupposition.

The notion of 'indefinite past' was proposed by Reichenbach (1947) and has subsequently been developed by Klein (1992, 1994, 2000) and Katz (2003) to distinguish present perfect from simple past. Reichenbach posits three grammatical concepts of time: speech time (S), which is the time at which the sentence is uttered; event time (E), which is the time of the event described by

the sentence; and reference time (R), which is the time described by the tense of the sentence. Based on these, he proposed the following:

- (4) a. In the past tense, R precedes S.
- b. In the perfect aspect, E precedes R.

According to (4), in a present perfect sentence, the speech time and the reference time coincide, and the event time precedes the reference time, while in a simple past sentence the event time and the reference time coincide, and the reference time precedes the speech time. Similarly, Klein (1992) uses the parameters of TU (time of utterance), TSit (time of situation), and TT (topic time) instead of Reichenbach's S, E, and R. TU and TSit correspond to S and E, respectively but TT is a novel concept that refers to the time about which a claim is being made. Thus, in the perfect, TSit (E), which is different from TT, is not the time about which a claim is being made. In simple past, however, TT and TSit concur, and TSit is the time about which a claim is being made. Within this framework, he attempts to account for the definiteness effect. In the perfect, TSit is indefinite and less significant than TT. No definite temporal specification can be assigned to TSit. In present perfect sentences, TT concurs with TU, so TT is definite and TSit is indefinite. This gives an account of why definite temporal adverbials cannot be used along with the perfective aspect.

Another viable theory is based on the notion of 'extended now' — a longer stretch of time than the momentary 'now' utilized for conversational purposes (Portner, 2003). It implies that an event takes place within an interval of time that starts at a preterit time and extends up to (but does not necessarily include) the utterance time. To put it simply, present perfect is the past including the present and simple past is the past excluding the present (Park & Choe, 2013).

2. Potential Learning Problems for Chinese EFL Learners

The forms and meanings of tense and aspect are known to be very difficult for L2 learners to acquire. Non-native speakers' perceptions of L2 temporal and aspectual categories are likely to be affected by their L1 (Coppetiers, 1987). In particular, the learners whose L1 lacks inflectional tenses (e.g., Chinese) may be

faced with building an entirely new hypothesis of how time is used and referred to in English.

Chinese does not grammatically realize temporal locations of events. Instead, it relies on the use of lexical expressions such as temporal adverbials, as illustrated by the following examples (Saeed, 2009).

- (5) a. 他 昨天 有 课
 Ta zuotian you ke
 He yesterday have classes
 'He had classes yesterday.'
- b. 他 今天 有 课
 Ta jintian you ke
 He today have classes
 'He has classes today.'
- c. 他 明天 有 课
 Ta mingtian you ke.
 He tomorrow have classes
 'He will have classes tomorrow.'

Aspects are marked in Chinese by grammatical particles, *le* (了) and *guo* (过) for perfectives. According to Yoon (2012), these particles provide different ways of indicating the temporal contour of a situation without locating the event in time.

- (6) a. 他 去了 巴黎
 Ta qu le bali
 He go LE Paris
 'He has gone to Paris.'
- b. 他 去过 巴黎
 Ta qu guo bali
 He go GUO Paris.
 'He has been to Paris.'

The perfective particle *le* reports an event as a completed totality, and *guo*

suggests experience or something that occurred at least once before (Matthew & Yip, 1994). If there is no definite temporal adverbial in the sentence, *le* and *guo* are functionally similar to the English perfect. However, they can also be used in sentences with definite temporal adverbials:

- (7) a. 他 去年 去了 巴黎。
 Ta qunian qu le bali
 He last year go LE Paris
 'He went to Paris last year.'
- b. 他们 三年前 见 过。
 Ta men sannianqian jian guo
 They three years ago meet GUO
 'They met three years ago.'

Because of the less restricted application of the L1 perfective particles, Chinese learners of L2 English may produce definite temporal expressions in present perfect sentences. In addition, there is no corresponding category to the concept of past-under-past in Chinese. Thus, past perfect in English may demand more complex conceptual processes and hence pose a special challenge to Chinese L1 speakers.

Finally, although Chinese has particles to denote sentential aspects, the lexical aspects of individual verbs are not differentiated. Thus, both (8a) and (8b) are acceptable:

- (8) a. 孩子 睡 了 三个小时了。
 Haizi shui le sangexiaoshile
 The baby sleep LE three hours
 'The baby has slept for three hours.'
- b. 他 离开 了 三个小时了。
 Ta likai le sangexiaoshile
 He leave LE three hours
 'He has been away for three hours'
 *'He has left for three hours.'

The sentence in (8b) is not acceptable in English because the intrinsic meaning of the verb *leave* is punctual rather than durative. Punctual verbs describe an event that occurs so instantaneously that it involves virtually no duration of time. On the contrary, durative verbs describe a situation or process lasting for a period of time. Words like *leave*, *arrive*, *start*, etc. have a punctual meaning, so the events denoted by these verbs cannot last *for three hours*. However, Chinese does not have such distinctions. Therefore, the verbs that describe punctual events can be modified by durative expressions referring to an interval that starts from the occurrence of the event and ends at the utterance time.

III. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 142 undergraduate students enrolled in a technology university in southern China. Among them, 73 were first-year students majoring in electronic commerce and 69 were third-year students majoring in digital images. According to their English scores on the college entrance examination, the first-year students were identified as low-intermediate level learners. The third-year students, who had recently passed the CET (College English Test) Level 4, were qualified as upper-intermediate level learners. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 with an average of 19.8, and 84 were males and 58 were females. Although English education in China has been reformed for decades, the mainstream pedagogy is still teacher-centered and test-oriented.

3.2 Instrument

Data were collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were acquired by means of a written questionnaire designed to assess the students' knowledge of the target English tenses and aspects. Qualitative data were obtained from dialogical interviews, enabling an in-depth analysis of the students' developmental interlanguage.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 multiple-choice items, 10 cloze items, and 10 Chinese-English translation items, so as to assess the examinees' knowledge from multiple perspectives. The items used in the present study were adopted from CET-4 and the written elicitation task in Park and Choe (2013). A small-scale pilot test was conducted to check the reliability of the instrument. Several items that caused lexical or situational ambiguity were eliminated and the words that might complicate interpretation of the given discourse were replaced. Some examples are shown below:

TABLE 1 Example Test Items

| Item Type | Examples |
|-----------------|--|
| Multiple Choice | By the time I got to the office, the meeting ____ without me. My boss was furious with me. ① had already begun ② began ③ have already begun A: ____ your homework yet? B: Yes. I finished it a moment ago. ① Did you do ② Have you done ③ Had you done |
| Cloze | A: Do you want to go to the movies at the Palace Theater with us tonight? B: No thanks. We _____ (see, already) it. We _____ (see) it last week. A: How was the film yesterday? B: It's wonderful, but by the time we ____ (get to) the cinema, the film ____ (start), so we missed the first five minutes. |
| Translation | 到上学期为止我们一共学了5000个新单词。 _____ e.g. We had learned/learned 5000 new words by last semester. 电影已经开始了十分钟。_____ e.g. The movie has been on for ten minutes. |

The multiple-choice items asked students to choose the most appropriate form from three given choices. The cloze items provided the base forms of verbs and students supplied the missing verb forms with a proper auxiliary if required. One of the drawbacks of the cloze test was that the testee's knowledge might only be partially reflected in the elicited responses. The translation items were controlled entirely by the students themselves; they composed full sentences with a tense-aspect that they thought to be most appropriate in the

given context. However, the input sentences written in L1 Chinese might influence their encoding of the sentences into L2 English. The integration of the strong and weak points of the three tasks was expected to provide a more comprehensive assessment of the students' knowledge of the target grammar.

3.3 Procedure

Individual students' performances on the questionnaire were scored for analysis. Each multiple-choice item was worth one point. The scoring of the cloze and translation tasks was done in terms of both accuracy in form and appropriacy in use. Following Bardovi-Harlig (1992), formal accuracy and appropriate use were scored independently, which made it possible for each response to fall in one of the following four categories: (a) both correct in form and appropriate in use for the context; (b) correct in form but inappropriate in use; (c) incorrect in form but appropriate in use; (d) neither morphologically correct nor semantically appropriate. Since the focus of the study was on tense-aspect forms, errors in subject-verb agreement or spelling mistakes (except verb forms) were not taken into account.

After the data from the questionnaire were collected, class discussions were conducted three days later with first-year and third-year students separately. The majority of the interview questions were based on the items that caused high error rates (e.g., *Why do you think simple past is adequate for ()?*, *Would you describe your decision making process while solving this item?*, *Could you explain the meaning of () to me?*).

TABLE 2 Scoring Examples

| Example | Form | Use |
|-------------------------------|------|-----|
| I'm sure we've met before. | 1 | 1 |
| I'm sure we met before. | 1 | 0 |
| I'm sure we've meeted before. | 0 | 1 |
| I'm sure we was meet before. | 0 | 0 |

The participants looked at both the test items and their own responses. Their responses were copied and handed out to them without correction in order to stimulate their recall processes. Besides, other prompting questions were

accompanied to help them elaborate their decisions. The discussions were recorded with the participants' permission. Their verbal reports about the meanings of the target tenses and aspects and the influence of discourse on their choice of a tense-aspect were transcribed.

IV. Results and Discussion

The mean accuracy rates on the three tasks were shown in Table 3. The 3rd-year students obtained higher scores than the 1st-year students on all the three tasks. However, they did not perform significantly better than the 1st-year students insofar as formal accuracy was concerned. Both groups achieved higher scores on formal accuracy than on appropriate use in the cloze and translation tasks. This demonstrates that they did not fully acquire the usage of the tenses and aspects even though they were capable of producing the correct forms.

TABLE 3 Mean Accuracy Rates on Three Tasks

| | | Yr1 (<i>N</i> = 73) | Yr3 (<i>N</i> = 69) | χ^2 | <i>p</i> |
|-----------------|------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------|----------|
| Multiple-Choice | | 55.9 | 66.8 | 17.817 | .000 |
| Cloze | Form | 81.7 | 84.6 | 3.515 | .061 |
| | Use | 53.2 | 69.7 | 68.857 | .000 |
| Translation | Form | 88.9 | 91.6 | 2.586 | .108 |
| | Use | 61.1 | 77.4 | 42.388 | .000 |

Although the 3rd-year students attained higher scores than the 1st-year students, the gap between their formal accuracy and appropriate use was still large.

TABLE 4 Mean Accuracy for Each Tense–Aspect

| Group | Simple Past | χ^2 | <i>p</i> | Pres. Perf | χ^2 | <i>p</i> | Past Perf. | χ^2 | <i>p</i> |
|-------|----------------|----------|----------|---------------|----------|----------|---------------|----------|----------|
| Yr1 | 76.8 | 41.508 | .000 | 69.4 | 43.943 | .000 | 57.7 | 36.555 | .000 |
| Yr3 | 85.9 | | | 79.9 | | | 68.1 | | |

The accuracy rates decreased in the order of simple past, present perfect, and

past perfect. The finding that past perfect is more difficult than present perfect for Chinese EFL learners is revealing, as most previous studies focused on the comparison of simple past and present perfect. The differences between the 1st-year students and the 3rd-year students in the three tense-aspect categories were all statistically significant. The accuracy rates on the form and use of each tense-aspect were shown in Table 5. The past participle forms of verbs were less acquired than the past forms. In formal accuracy, the students produced the forms of simple past and past perfect more accurately than those of present perfect.

TABLE 5 Mean Accuracy in Form and Use

| Group | | Form | χ^2 | <i>p</i> | Use | χ^2 | <i>p</i> |
|----------------|-----|------|----------|----------|------|----------|----------|
| Simple Past | Yr1 | 90.1 | 3.638 | .056 | 72.3 | 26.516 | .000 |
| | Yr3 | 93.1 | | | 84.2 | | |
| Pres. Perf. | Yr1 | 77.3 | 9.264 | .002 | 63.5 | 36.915 | .000 |
| | Yr3 | 84.1 | | | 78.9 | | |
| Past Perf. | Yr1 | 85.4 | .070 | .792 | 32.1 | 65.772 | .000 |
| | Yr3 | 84.9 | | | 54.6 | | |

However, they knew the usage of simple past and present perfect more accurately than that of past perfect. It is noteworthy that differences between the two groups in formal accuracy were significant only for present perfect, while differences in use were significant across all the tenses/aspects.

Class discussions took place three days later for the purpose of gaining more detailed insights into the following two questions: How do the students discriminate the meanings of the three tense/aspect categories, and how far is their apprehension of the L2 tense/aspect categories influenced by their L1? The discussions were intended to elicit their understanding of the target linguistic features. Their verbal reports on the decision-making processes they undertook while answering the questionnaire were recorded.

All in all, both 1st-year (low-intermediate) and 3rd-year (upper-intermediate) students had explicit knowledge about the tenses and aspects in question. They conceived simple past as describing a completed action in the past, and present perfect as describing events that began in the past and continued into the

present, or speaking about life experiences. A few 3rd-year students also mentioned that present perfect talks about events that happened recently and thereby influence the present. There were few 1st-year students who mentioned this use. They also commented on the words and phrases associated with the present perfect form, such as *yet, never, already, ever, so far, up to now, since, for*, etc. Regardless of proficiency level, the students explained past perfect as a completed action before another action in the past. Several 3rd-year students also mentioned the use of past perfect in counterfactual conditional sentences (e.g., *If we had gone by taxi, we wouldn't have been late*).

Table 6 shows the items that caused frequent errors, the majority of which were from past perfect contexts.

TABLE 6 Items that Produced the Highest Error Rates

| | | Yr1 (N = 73) | | | Yr3 (N = 69) | | |
|-----------------|------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | | Item | Tense Aspect | Accuracy (%) | Item | Tense Aspect | Accuracy (%) |
| Multiple Choice | | 10 | Past Perf. | 15.1 | 10 | Past Perf. | 30.3 |
| | | 3 | Pres. Perf. | 39.7 | 3 | Pres. Perf. | 58.0 |
| | | 8 | Simple Past | 43.8 | 7 | Past Perf. | 58.0 |
| Cloze | Form | 9 | Pres. Perf. | 37.0 | 9 | Pres. Perf. | 50.7 |
| | | 3 | Past Perf. | 45.2 | 5 | Past Perf. | 53.6 |
| | | 2 | Pres. Perf. | 49.3 | 2 | Pres. Perf. | 60.7 |
| | Use | 5 | Past Perf. | 17.8 | 1 | Past Perf. | 43.8 |
| | | 1 | Past Perf. | 23.3 | 5 | Past Perf. | 47.8 |
| | | 6 | Past Perf. | 24.1 | 3 | Past Perf. | 52.2 |
| Translation | Form | 4 | Pres. Perf. | 58.9 | 6 | Pres. Perf. | 71.0 |
| | | 6 | Pres. Perf. | 74.0 | 4 | Pres. Perf. | 79.7 |
| | | 5 | Past Perf. | 86.3 | 5 | Past Perf. | 89.9 |
| | Use | 2 | Past Perf. | 15.1 | 2 | Past Perf. | 36.2 |
| | | 10 | Past Perf. | 21.9 | 7 | Past Perf. | 42.0 |
| | | 7 | Yr1 Perf. | 23.3 | 10 | Past Perf. | 47.8 |

The items that produced high error rates were generally consistent between the two groups. Nevertheless, the 3rd-year students' accuracy rates were higher than the 1st-year students' on the corresponding test items. The difficult items in formal accuracy were different from those in appropriate use, which further legitimizes the necessity to analyze the two dimensions separately. That is, learners might be able to produce a morphologically correct form even though they did not fully acquire the meaning of the form.

Among the multiple-choice items, the following item was the most problematic one for both groups:

(9) Multiple-Choice 10

“You’ll never guess who I met last Sunday. My old teacher! We _____ for 20 years.”

TABLE 7 The Results of Multiple-Choice Item 10

| Group | Simple Past | Present Perfect | Past perfect |
|-------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Y1 | 32.6% | 52.3% | 15.1% |
| Y3 | 10.6% | 59.1% | 30.3% |

The given sentence means that the speaker had not met her teacher for twenty years before she met him last week. The event time of the predicate *not meet my old teacher* refers to a duration before the definite reference time *last week*. The effect of the event does not last up to now. Thus, the past perfect form fits the context. However, more than half of the students chose the present perfect form. The 1st-year students even preferred simple past to past perfect. A number of students in both groups referred to *for* as a present perfect indicator that entails an action that lasts for a period of time. They mechanically judged sentences containing *for* to be under the present perfect context. In addition, there were students who said that they tried to translate the sentence into Chinese. They tended to put it with the particle *le*, as illustrated by (10) below.

- (10) 我们 二十年 没 见面 了。
 wo men er shi nian mei jian mian le
 We twenty years not meet LE
 We have/had not met for twenty years

The aspectual particle *le* states an event as having been completed. Thus, its function is partly equivalent to the English present perfect when there is no definite time expression in the sentence. However, they disregarded the discourse context in which the event time refers to a completed event before a definite reference time in the past (i.e., *last week*).

A large number of 1st-year students relied on the adverbial phrase *last Sunday*, which explicitly refers to a definite time point. A few students remarked that since *last Sunday* is a specific time in the past, the sentence should be under the simple past context. Some students also mentioned that since *met* was used in the preceding sentence, the same form should be used in the following sentence as well. This discourse-based choice of tense provides an account for the 1st-year students' responses to the following item:

- (11) A: Have we met before?
B: Yes, we _____ at the conference two years ago.

Given this context, more than half (53.0%) of the 1st-year students chose the present perfect form, 43.8% chose simple past, and 3.2% chose past perfect. Because the topic event happened at a definite time (i.e., *two years ago*), the simple past form should be used. The most common response was: "Since Speaker A asks *Have we met before?*, the answer should be either *Yes, we've met* or *No, we haven't met*, to make it consistent with the question form." Similar to (9) earlier, they chose the present perfect form to be in accord with the tense-aspect in the immediately preceding sentence.

Again, there were students who tried to translate the sentence into Chinese. They said something like "When I translated the sentence into Chinese, I found it talked about one's experience, and present perfect is used to convey one's experience in English." Moreover, they considered the English perfect to be analogous to the function of the Chinese particle *guo*:

- (12) 我们 两年前 在 会议上 见 过
wo men liang nian qian zai hui yi shang jian guo
We two years ago at the conference meet GUO
We met at the conference two years ago.

There is a partial overlap between the function of *guo* and the English present perfect. In Chinese, the particle *guo* suggests experience or an event that occurred at least once before. In this respect, its function is similar to the English perfect. However, *guo* can be used in sentences with definite time adverbials:

- (13) a. 我们 见 过.
 wo men jian guo
 We meet GUO
 We have met before.
- b. 我们 两年前 见 过.
 wo men liang nian qian jian guo
 We two years ago meet GUO
 We met two years ago.

In English, where tense and aspect operate independently of each other, the present perfect form does not concur with a definite temporal adverbial. In contrast, Chinese treats them as an integrated system. Therefore, the perfective *guo* and *le* can be applied in sentences with (or without) definite adverbials. The more restricted tense-aspect system of English may lead the learners whose L1 has a less restricted system to make overextension errors. This implies that their perceptions of the L2 temporal and aspectual concepts were largely based upon their L1 knowledge.

Another problematic item was shown in (14):

(14) Multiple-Choice 3

- A: Do you like this poem?
 B: This is a poem whose meaning I can't understand,
 although I _____ before.

TABLE 8 The Results of Multiple-Choice Item 3

| Group | Simple Past | Present Perfect | Past perfect |
|-------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Y1 | 46.9% | 42.3% | 10.8% |
| Y3 | 37.8% | 54.7% | 7.5% |

In this dialogue, the event of the speaker having heard the poem happened in the past, but the effect of the event lasts to the utterance time, which is also the topic time (i.e., *I can't understand*). Thus, the present perfect form is most appropriate. It foregrounds the speaker's experience and connects to the present discourse topic. The simple past foregrounds the event that the speaker heard the

poem but diminishes its connection to the present topic. The 1st-year students preferred simple past over present perfect. A substantial portion of the 3rd-year students (37.8%) also chose simple past. This result corresponds to Park and Choe (2013), in which less than 40% of their participants used the present perfect form in a similar context. Some of the students' comments were as follows:

- "I saw *before* in the sentence. It talks about an event that happened in the past, so I think simple past is the correct form to use."
- "The event *I heard the poem* happened a long time ago and it was finished in the past. There's a long distance between the event and now. So past perfect will fit the context."
- "I translated the sentence into Chinese and found that it talks about one's experience, so present perfect should be used."

Again, many students commented on *before* as a clue for the event time, but they did not recognize the connection of the event to the present discourse. Another frequently reported argument was that the event of my having heard the poem happened in the past and did not last until now, so simple past should be applied. Likewise, they did not consider the connection of the event to the present topic in their choice of a tense-aspect.

A few 1st-year students said that they chose past perfect because they felt the time distance between the event time of *I heard the poem then* and the topic time of *I can't understand it now* sounds too far. One possible explanation for this is that the temporal particle *before* designates an indefinite past. Thus, the distance between the event time and the topic time is not specified. It was also observed that some students translated the sentence into Chinese and analogized *guo* with the English present perfect. In this case, translation was helpful to provide clues for the interpretation of the given sentence.

The following context (Item 7) draws on a counterfactual conditional, which talks about an impossible past condition that did not actually happen.

(15) Multiple-Choice Item 7

A: I can't believe it!

B: If you _____ my advice, it wouldn't have happened.

TABLE 9 The Results of Multiple-Choice Item 7

| Group | Simple Past | Present Perfect | Past perfect |
|-------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Y1 | 30.3% | 14.9% | 54.8% |
| Y3 | 29.7% | 12.3% | 58.0% |

In (15), the condition clause takes the past perfect form, and the consequence clause is under a conditional perfect. The speaker A did not listen to B's advice, so the condition did not happen then and it can never be true thereafter. About 30% of the students in each group chose simple past, and over 10% chose present perfect.

- "The event of A's taking B's advice might happen and be completed at a certain point in the past, so the simple past tense should be used here."
- "When we talk about something that is impossible, we use the past form in the *if*-clause."
- "The effect of the hypothetical situation, A's taking B's advice, lasts up to now and affects the consequence, so present perfect fits the context."
- "The following sentence used the present perfect form, so the preceding sentence should also be spoken in the same form."

There was a group of students who argued in favor of simple past because the sentence describes a hypothetical event in the past. They did not take into account the fact that this event was an unrealized one that did not actually happen in the past. In addition, a considerable number of 3rd-year students relied on prescriptive grammar. They answered that when talking about something impossible, simple past should be used in the *if*-clause. These students failed to distinguish counterfactual conditionals from real conditionals used for hypothetical situations in a present or future time frame. Furthermore, the 3rd-year students who chose present perfect said that they thought the effect of the hypothetical situation has lasted up to now and influenced the consequence. They did not recognize that the consequence clause, *it wouldn't have happened*, was expressed in the conditional past perfect, and so the effect of the hypothetical event does not reach the present time of utterance. A few 1st-year students again made a discourse-based choice, claiming that since the

following sentence was expressed under the present perfect context, the previous one should be consistent with it.

As mentioned earlier, the results from the cloze and translation tasks were analyzed with respect to formal accuracy and appropriate use. The most common errors found in both groups were caused by the past participle forms of irregular verbs such as *show*, *leave*, *see*, *buy*, *sell*, *lose* and *get*. They often overgeneralized the regular past participle form to irregular verbs, adding *-ed* to the root form of the verb (e.g., *I had leaved my computer*; *He hasn't showed up yet*). Some students were even unaware of the difference between the past forms and the past participle forms (e.g., *We have saw it already*).

When it comes to appropriacy in use, past perfect caused the greatest difficulty for both groups. This can be partially attributed to the absence of the past-under-past category in Chinese. Chinese does not have a grammatical device that denotes a point (or an interval) in the past that precedes another point in the past. This conceptual lack of a past relative to another past in the grammar of Chinese may require more complex cognitive processing and thus more challenging to Chinese EFL learners. This is also evidenced by the following items:

(16) Cloze 1

A: How was the film yesterday?

B: It's wonderful, but by the time we got to the cinema,
the film _____, so we missed the first five minutes.

TABLE 10 The Results of Cloze Item 1

| Group | Simple Past | Pres. Perf. | Past Perf. | Others |
|-------|-------------|-------------|------------|--------|
| Yr1 | 48.4% | 26.2% | 23.3% | 2.1% |
| Yr3 | 30.9% | 25.3% | 43.8% | 0.0% |

(17) Translation 2

他 在 那家医院 工作 了 二十年, 直到 去年 退休.

He at that hospital work LE twenty years, until last year retire

He ___ in that hospital for twenty years until he retired last year.

TABLE 11 The Results of Translation Item 2

| Group | Simple Past | Pres. Perf. | Past Perf. | Others |
|-------|-------------|-------------|------------|--------|
| Yr1 | 36.0% | 44.6% | 15.1% | 4.3% |
| Yr3 | 21.6% | 39.8% | 36.2% | 2.4% |

(18) Translation 7

他 去年 去 美国 之前一直 住在 中国.

He last year go America until live in China

He _____ in China until he went to America last year.

TABLE 12 The Results of Translation Item 7

| Group | Simple Past | Pres. Perf. | Past Perf. | Others |
|-------|-------------|-------------|------------|--------|
| Yr1 | 27.4% | 42.1% | 23.3% | 7.2% |
| Yr3 | 21.5% | 30.1% | 42.0% | 6.4% |

(19) Translation 10

到 上学期为止 我们 学 了 5000个 新单词.

By end of last semester we learn LE 5000 new words

By the end of last semester we _____ 5000 new words.

TABLE 13 The Results of Translation Item 10

| Group | Simple Past | Pres. Perf. | Past Perf. | Others |
|-------|-------------|-------------|------------|--------|
| Yr 1 | 26.3% | 47.2% | 21.9% | 4.6% |
| Yr 3 | 18.4% | 30.6% | 47.8% | 3.2% |

Overall, more than half of the students were not able to use the past perfect form in distinction from the other tense-aspect forms. Interestingly, the students preferred to use simple past over present perfect on the cloze items, whereas they did so the other way around on the translation items. This suggests that the L1 effect may vary by L2 task type. In translation, the input sentences written in Chinese might have influenced the students' encoding in L2 English. For instance, Items 2 and 10 contained the aspectual particle *le*. Chinese students had a tendency to take *le* as a signal for present perfect. Their verbal responses confirmed this:

- “There was 了 in the Chinese sentences. It means a completed event and its meaning is similar to English present perfect.”
- “I saw 了 in the Chinese expressions, it indicates an event in the completed state, and the effect of the event lasts up to now. The sentence means we learned 5000 new words, and we still know these words now, so the present perfect is appropriate”

Moreover, their decision on a tense-aspect could have been affected by the durativity of the given event. Past perfect conveys a completed action before or a durative activity until a reference point in the past. In (16), the verb *start* designates a momentary action that occurred before another action in the past. However, the other verbs, *work*, *live*, and *learn*, refer to durative actions. The students may perceive momentary actions to be expressed in simple past and durative actions in present perfect.

- “I think that the film’s getting started is a momentary event that was completed at a past time, and it cannot last for a time, so the perfect form should not be used here.”
- “I feel that working in the hospital is a durative state that has lasted for twenty years, so the present perfect form should be selected.”
- “Learning new words is a repeated, ongoing action from a past time, and there is 直到 (*by*), which indicates a durative action. So present perfect is appropriate here.”

Similarly, there were a large number of students who decided on a tense-aspect with reference to L1 counterparts, consistency rules, and particular closed-class items. Next, consider the following item:

(20) Cloze 6

A: Last night, I finally told Lisa how I feel about her.

B: What did you tell her?

A: That I ____ (feel) this way for a very long time that I really care about her.

In this example, the event time (i.e., *how I feel about her*) began in the past, and the feeling lasts to the present, which is the topic time. Using a present perfect foregrounds the speaker's feeling at the present. However, 1st-year students were more likely to choose the simple past form over the present perfect form. They intended to emphasize the beginning of the event rather than the connection of the event to the present.

Finally, another kind of error was observed in the following item:

(21) Translation 3

这部电影 已经 开始 了 十分钟.

zhe bu dian ying yi jing kai shi le shi fen zhong

The movie already start LE ten minutes

The movie has been on for ten minutes.

Although the majority of the students used the correct present perfect form, a sizable number of students translated it into *The movie has started/has begun for ten minutes*. This is probably because such punctual verbs can be used to express an event lasting for a period of time in Chinese. Thus, if one tries to translate the Chinese sentence directly into English in a word-by-word manner, it might lead to the erroneous use of punctual verbs modified by durative time adverbials. This shows that a verb's inherent lexical aspect is also a challenge to Chinese EFL students.

V. Conclusion

Chinese L1 speakers at the intermediate level of L2 English showed a high level of accuracy with regard to the forms of simple past, present perfect, and past perfect. More advanced learners were better able to discern the three tense-aspect categories than lower-level learners. However, the gap between formal accuracy and appropriate use did not become smaller as a function of the students' development in L2 proficiency. This indicates that accuracy in form and appropriacy in use are acquired at different rates, with the acquisition of the former usually preceding that of the latter.

The study also found that Chinese EFL learners tend to apply the simple past form to a broader range of context than its standard usage while applying the past perfect form to a narrower range of context. Past perfect presents the greatest challenge to Chinese L1 speakers. The students' self-reports show that they are not fully aware of the meanings of the English perfect. Instead, they are predisposed to rely on local lexical cues, tense-aspect consistency rules, and L1 rough equivalents in their choice of a tense-aspect.

There is a partial overlap between the particles *le* and *guo* in Chinese and the English perfective aspect. The particles can be applied to the sentences that contain definite time-referring expressions. Thus, L1-influenced errors are likely to occur if the learners conceive the particles as functionally equivalent to the English perfect. Moreover, the lack of grammatical morphemes for the notion of past-under-past in Chinese makes it difficult for Chinese L1 speakers to internalize the form, meaning, and use of past perfect. Finally, lexical aspects also present potential learning problems to Chinese students.

In conclusion, it is suggested that since group discussions can only be useful for observing the learners' representative tendency rather than each learner's individual interlanguage, individualized interviews will be more conducive to understanding their strategies and evolving hypotheses in connection with L2 development, and that pedagogical intervention should be directed toward raising the learners' awareness of the functions of each tense-aspect category as part of an integrated system of usage categories.

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