Acquisition of the Present Perfect and the Simple Past by Malaysian Chinese ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

The simple past and present perfect are two areas of English grammar that are introduced to Malaysian learners at an early stage at primary school level. However, many Malaysian learners seem to have persistent difficulty distinguishing between the two and using them even at an advanced level of proficiency. This persistent difficulty raises the question of whether or not such difficulty is directly attributable to first language (L1) influence. Since competing hypotheses attempting to explain this phenomenon have received limited testing particularly in the Malaysian context, this study considers the implications of the FFFH approach, (Hawkins & Chan, 1997) to explain how the L1 might influence the L2 acquisition of the English present perfect. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether the persistent difficulty in the use of the present perfect and the simple past is directly attributable to L1 influence. In addition, the study also investigated whether or not Chinese speakers experience syntactic deficits in the L2 if specified parameterised features present in the functional categories of the L2 are not specified in the L1. Participants involved in this study were 30 Chinese ESL learners whose proficiency in English ranged from intermediate to advanced levels based on their combination scores in the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT). The instruments used for this study was a Paradigm Task, which was taken from Liszka's work (2005), and an oral production task. The study was in part a replication of Liszka's study (2005) which was the acquisition of form-meaning relations of the English present perfect among L2 learners. The results of the present study suggest that the Chinese ESL learners persistently face difficulty in their production of the present perfect and simple past forms. The finding would have implications for the Malaysian ESL classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Although the simple past (SP) and present perfect (PP) are introduced to Malaysian learners at an early stage at the primary school level, many Malaysian learners seem to have persistent difficulty in distinguishing between the two and using them even at an advanced level after 12 years of exposure to the language. This phenomenon also seems to be common among other Southeast Asian ESL learners such as Chinese and Vietnamese (see for e.g. Hinkel, 1992, 1997; Svalberg & Chuchu 1998). One of the possible reasons is that many Asian languages, including Chinese, are 'tenseless' and the nature of the languages has caused speakers of such languages to become less than proficient in acquiring tense and aspect in English.

Research in the acquisition of tense and aspect among L2 learners has grown from the investigation of tense-aspect morphology of the morpheme-order studies to investigations of interlanguage temporal semantics (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 1992a, 1997a, 1999; Liszka, 2001, 2004, 2005).

Within the generative grammar perspective, there are a number of frameworks attempting to explain the nature of L2 development and ultimate attainment. They fall mainly into two approaches. In one approach, advanced L2 speakers are argued to have complete representations of the morphosyntactic properties of the target language, such as Prèvost and White's 'Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis' (2000) and Lardiere's 'Morphological Misreading Hypothesis' (1998a; 1998b). The other approach, of which Hawkins and Chan's 'Failed Functional Features Hypothesis' (FFFH) (1997) and its updated version, the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH) (Hawkins, 2005b) are a part of, suggests that beyond some critical period in childhood, unselected parameterised features of functional categories cease to be available. Therefore, a permanent syntactic deficit arises, when a feature of the L2 is not specified in the first language (L1).

The motivation for the study is there is still insufficient research on the expression of temporality in relation to the Universal Grammar (UG) framework in explaining the persistent difficulty in acquiring the English present perfect by Malaysian L1 Chinese adult speakers of L2 English. The persistent difficulty raises the question of whether or not such difficulty is directly attributable to L1 influence.

Several previous studies have stated that ESL learners tend to fossilise in producing native-like form of tense and aspect. Seliger (1978) claimed that tense and aspect, together with the distribution of some prepositions and articles tend to fossilise universally, presumably after a particular stage among L2 learners in their interlanguage competence. Coppieters (1987), who tested knowledge of the *Imparfait* and *Passé Composé* distinction by French near-native speakers (among

other structures), also concluded that native-like competence in the tense/aspect domain is not possible, and that this area of the grammar, which he assumed was not part of UG, was subject to a critical period. However, other studies found that the majority of ESL learners are able to establish near native-like domain of tense and aspect (e.g. Flynn & Manuel, 1991; Birdsong, 1992; White & Genesee, 1996; Bruhn de Garavito, 1999). Some studies have also shown that advanced ESL learners are able to have complete representations of the morphosyntactic properties of the target language (e.g. Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996; Lardiere 1998a, 1998b; Prévost & White, 2000). Yet, other studies have reported that even the very advanced learners have problems acquiring the correct L2 form resulting from a representational deficit arising from L1-L2 parametric differences, where a parameterised feature of the L2 that is not selected in the L1 is unavailable to post-childhood L2 learners (see e.g. Smith & Tsimpli, 1995; Hawkins & Chan, 1997; Eubank & Gregg, 1999; Hawkins, 2005b; Wong, 2012).

With regard to specific morphosyntactic properties, it has been noted that English tenses are difficult to acquire (see e.g. Richards, 1981; DeCarrico, 1986; Riddle, 1986). Comrie (1985) mentions that various cultural groups "have radically different conceptualizations of time" (p. 3) and only some measure time and occurring events with exactitude. Further, Von Stutterheim and Klein (1987) explain that, unlike children acquiring their L1, L2 learners do not necessarily "acquire" (p. 194) the basic concepts but rather acquire new ways of expressing them and that the concepts of locating events in time differ among languages and cultures. Coppetiers (1987) states that non-native speakers' perceptions of tense meanings were strongly affected by meanings and uses of temporality in their L1s and that speakers of tenseless languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, employ tenses in an L2 differently than speakers of Romance and Germanic languages do (pp. 560-561). Hinkel (1992) found that Chinese, Korean, and Japanese learners had difficulty identifying temporal meanings with English tense markers and appeared to interpret time references in an L2 differently than do native speakers and speakers of Spanish and Arabic, whose L1s have developed morphological tense systems. She points out that speakers of tenseless languages may see divisions of time and tense in an L2 according to their L1's conceptual paradigms. A more recent study on cross-linguistic variation and influence into the acquisition of the present perfect include work done by Lim (2007). In his study, Lim found that L1 Malay learners committed errors in the acquisition of the English present perfect. The findings suggest that most errors can be attributed to both cross-linguistic differences in the use of perfective verb phrases as well as intralingual difficulties in differentiating the temporal references of particular verb forms.

In view of the variable outcomes of these studies, it is pertinent that more such studies be carried out to arrive at a more definite conclusion.

In a study by Liszka (2005), it was shown that advanced Chinese ESL learners exhibit persistent difficulty in associating the present perfect semantic properties with its overt form in a native-like way. The findings of the study suggest that the absence of the [+/-past] feature and the presence of the perfective feature, might lead to a persistent representational deficit. In other studies (e.g. Liszka 2001, 2005; Wong & Chan, 2007), on the acquisition of present perfect, it has been found that results support the FFFH (Hawkins and Chan, 1997). This hypothesis and its updated version (Hawkins, 2005b) has only received limited testing in the Malaysian context. The purpose of this study is to build upon the results of the earlier studies by focusing on the claim made in the FFFH in explaining the persistent difficulty posed by certain morphosyntactic properties in second language acquisition.

LINGUISTIC ASSUMPTIONS

Underlying Representations of the English Present Perfect

The account for the underlying representations of the English Present Perfect is taken from Liszka (2005). The English present perfect encodes features [+/- perfect] for aspect and [+/- past] for T(ense), whose morphosyntactic level of representation is overtly realised by present tense auxiliary *have* and either a regular or irregular participle (*V-en*):

1. I have/She has finished/eaten her meal.
   (in Liszka, 2005)

Underlying this representation is the combination of past and present meaning, which yields an interpretation that locates an event in the past conveyed by *V-en* with enduring/current temporal relevance to the present. The former is conveyed by the past participle *V-en* and the latter is conveyed by the present tense of *have* (e.g. Comrie, 1976; Smith, 1989).

Suh (1992, in Bardovi-Harlig, 1997a) suggested that the present perfect and the simple past share the feature [+anterior], but differ on the feature [current relevance] with the present perfect carrying [+current relevance] and the simple past [-current relevance]. According to Bardovi-Harlig (1997a), the shared feature "anterior," or past, has led many researchers to argue that the simple past and present perfect are truth-functionally identical; that is, they share the same truth value (Haegeman, 1989; Inoue, 1979).

Based on Liszka's (2005) summary of Reichenbach's framework (1947), temporal systems are founded on the linear ordering of the three temporal primitives: (S) for 'speech time', (E) for 'event time' and (R) for 'reference time'. The connection among these primitives yields the following configuration: E_S, R, in which the event time (E) that happens earlier is separated by the line from (S), (R), which takes place concurrently. In contrast, the present is

where the three primitives (S), (R) and (E) take place at the same time and the past is where both (E) and (R) are before (S). From this account, the present perfect semantically overlaps with both these tenses. In the case of the present perfect and the present, the overlap is (R) and in the case of the present perfect and the past it is (E). Languages that encode syntactic features on the tense category T(ense) represent a subset of this set. Following Hornstein (1990), Giorgi and Pianesi (1997) suggest that a direct connection between (E) and (S) has never happened: (R) is needed to mediate between the two. The possible connections between labelled T(ense)1 and T(ense)2 that bring about the list of tenses are as follows:

$$\text{T(ense)1: S\_R future}$$
$$\text{R\_S past}$$
$$\text{(S, R) present}$$

$$\text{T(ense)2: E\_R perfect}$$
$$\text{R\_E prospective}$$
$$\text{(E, R) neutral}$$

Further, Liszka (2005, p.49) states that the morphosyntactic level representation of the English present perfect is overtly realised by present tense auxiliary *have* and the participle *V-ed/en*: 'I *have*/she *has finished/eaten* her meal.' The fundamental truth about the representation is that both present and past meaning co-exist, yielding an interpretation that traces an event in the past with current temporal relevance to the present. As for T-roles, T1 is realised by the present tense of *have* and T2 is realised by the past participle which give rise to the

following configuration: (S, R) • (E_R) = E_S, R. The configurations for the past and the present also reveal their semantic overlap with the present perfect:

a. the present $\quad$ (S,R) • (R,E) = S,R,E
b. the past $\quad$ (R_S) • (E,R) = E,R_S
c. the present perfect (S,R) • (E_R) = E_S,R
$$\text{(in Liszka, 2004)}$$

Chinese Verbs, Tense and Aspect

There is no inflection to denote tense in Chinese (Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 184). Moreover, verbal inflection is not used to denote the relation between the time a situation takes place and the time that the event is being spoken about. Past, present and future events are not included in the syntax of a sentence. In Chinese, if the context makes the time frame obvious, there is no need to add anything to mark time in a sentence. If there is a need to specify time, a time phrase is added to give the verb the necessary context to know the time the situation occurred. Chinese verbs therefore do not change to specify time frames the way English does. The following examples and the explanations that ensue are from Wong and Chan (2007):

2a. Neutral: *tā qù Malacca*
$\quad\quad$ HE/SHE GO MALACCA
$\quad\quad$ 'He/She went/ has gone to
$\quad\quad$ Malacca.'

2b. Past: *tā zuótiān qù Malacca*
$\quad\quad$ HE/SHE YESTERDAY GO
$\quad\quad$ MALACCA
$\quad\quad$ 'He/She went to Malacca
$\quad\quad$ yesterday.'

2c. Present: *tā xiànzài qù Malacca*
HE/SHE NOW GO
MALACCA
'He/She is going to Malacca (now).'

2d. Future: *tā míngtiān qù Malacca*
HE/SHE TOMORROW GO
MALACCA
'He/She will be going to Malacca (tomorrow).'
(Examples adapted from Wong & Chan, 2007)

In Chinese, aspectual suffixes are used to indicate aspect. Two aspectual suffixes that denote that something happened in the past are *le* and *gùo*. They are often used directly after the verb. The sentence *wǒ qù le Malacca* means *I went to Malacca.* The suffix here stresses the verb, emphasising that going itself is important. In English, this is translated into *I went*. Another example is presented in 3(b). The sentence means *Akiu washed that coat* where the suffix *le* emphasises the verb 'washed'.

3. (a) *wǒ qù le Malacca*
I GO PFV¹ MALACCA
'I went to Malacca'
(Example adapted from Wong & Chan, 2007)

(b) *Akiu xi-le na jian dayi*
AKIU WASH-PRV THAT CL COAT
'Akiu washed that coat.'
(Example adapted from Zhang, 2000)

¹PFV - Perfective Aspectual Suffix

In the sentence below, the whole idea of going to Malacca, *I went to Malacca* is being stressed rather than the going itself.

4. *wǒ qù Malacca le*
I GO MALACCA CRS²
'I went to Malacca.'
(Example adapted from Wong & Chan, 2007)

In *wǒ qù gùo Malacca,* the aspect particle *gùo* gives the meaning *I have been to Malacca.* In this instance, the particle stresses the fact of having been to Malacca. The speaker is not concerned with the going to get there. In English, the same expression would be *I've been to Malacca* or *I've been in Malacca* or *I've visited Malacca.* Zhang (2000) observed that in 5(b), *Akiu xi-guo,* the aspect particle *gùo* means *Akiu (at least once) washed that coat,* where the suffix *guo* encodes the experiential aspect.

5. (a) *wǒ qù gùo Malacca*
I GO-PFV MALACCA
'I have been to/visited Malacca.'
(Example adapted from Wong & Chan, 2007)

(b) *Akiu xi-guo na jian dayi*
AKIU WASH-EXP³ THAT CL⁴ COAT
'Akiu (at least once) washed that coat.'
(Example adapted from Zhang, 2000)

According to Norman (1998), telling whether actions are completed or not or

²CRS – Currently Relevant State
³EXP – Experiential
⁴CL – Classifier

whether they are in progress or not is important in Chinese. A series of action along the time axis is not a feature in Chinese. Completed action or perfective is shown by the suffix *–le*:

6. *wǒ kànle nèběn shū*
   I READ-PFV THAT-CL BOOK
   'I read that book'

7. *nǐ chīle fàn zài qù ba*
   YOU EAT-PFV FOOD THEN GO
   PCL[5]
   'Go after you have eaten'

Example (7) shows that the aspectual suffix *–le* may point to both the future and the past (as in example (6)); this means that it is talking about the aspect and not the tense. Uncompleted action or imperfect aspect is unmarked and there is no suffix or other overt marking related to it:

8. *zuótian wǎnshang wǒ kàn shū*
   YESTERDAY EVENING I READ
   BOOK
   'I read yesterday evening'

Parametric Variation between English and Chinese

In Chinese, *le* functions to signal a 'Currently Relevant State' (=CRS), that is "a state of affairs that has special current relevance to some particular Reference Time". Therefore, Chinese encodes perfect aspect overtly and this is realised by the sentence-final particle *le* (Li *et al.*, 1982, p. 22). For example, some event or state is pertinent to the "here and now" of the

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[5] PCL - Particle

speech scenario, where having gone shopping is "current" with regard to time, both (S) and (R) are present, and is as shown in (9) below:

9. *tā qù mǎi dōngxi le*
   HE GO BUY THING CRS
   He's gone shopping
   (Li *et al.*, 1982: 23)

And if *le* is related to the future reference time, it is used as shown in (10):

10. *(xià- ge yuè) wǒ jiù zài Rìběn le*
    (NEXT-CL MONTH) I THEN AT
    JAPAN CRS
    (Next month) I'll be in Japan
    (Li *et al.*, 1982: 23)

Chinese differs from English in that it does not select a formal parameterised [t/-past] feature for T(ense), (Li & Thompson, 1982; Norman, 1988). For example:

11. *wǒ hē-le sān bēi kāfēi le*
    I DRINK-PFV THREE-CUP
    COFFEE CRS
    I've drunk three cups of coffee.
    (Li *et al*., 1982: 25)

In the example (11) above, it seems that the perfective *V-le* signals the (completed) action of drinking three cups of coffee and the perfect *le* conveys its relevance to the present.

12. *Zhāngsān kànjiàn Lǐsì*
    ZHANGSAN SEES LISI
    Zhangsan saw Lisi
    (in Liszka, 2005)

In the above example, a specified tense feature [t/-past] is elemental to the

underlying combination of T(ense)-roles which yield the (S,R) • (E_R)=E_S,R configuration of the present perfect.

A comparison of the two languages has shown that English and Chinese differ from each other in the representation of the present perfect. Chinese lacks the tense feature associated with T(ense)1. If the predictions of the FFFH is supported, then L2-form-meaning associations of the present perfect are expected to be affected by L1 parameterisation for the Chinese participants. The verb in Chinese encodes [+/- perfect], but it does not encode a [+/- past] tense distinction. Liszka (2005) claimed that the persistent difficulty faced in acquiring present perfect might therefore be associated with the learners' establishing of (E) in the past and the present being used where the present perfect should be used. Therefore, it is predicted that this difficulty in associating the fundamental semantic representation of the English present perfect with its grammatical properties might remain an issue for the Chinese participants even at the advanced level.

THE STUDY

Purpose of the study

This study is in part, a replication of Liszka's study (2005). It investigated the acquisition of the English present perfect and simple past among two levels of proficiency-matched intermediate and advanced Chinese ESL learners and it sought to find out if the persistent difficulty in acquisition of the present perfect and simple past among this group of learners is the result of a representational deficit arising from L1-L2 parametric differences. Based on this specific objective, the following question was formulated for the study: To what extent do L1 Chinese speakers learning L2 English face persistent difficulty in acquiring the English present perfect and the simple past at intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency?

Methodology

Instrument

The instrument used for this study comprised four components. The first component was a standardised proficiency test which is the written multiple choice grammar section of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (Allan, 1992). The second component was the 'Vocabulary Levels Test' (VLT) (Nation, 1990), which incorporates the five levels of difficulty. This tests the learners' knowledge of English words. The third component was the Written Paradigm Task (Liszka, 2005), which tests the underlying knowledge of the English simple past and present perfect. The forth component was an oral production task with stimuli, designed to elicit utterances which included the use of simple past and present perfect in English.

The OPT (Allan, 1992) was the first test used to group learners into intermediate and advance proficiency levels based on their individual test scores. The test consists of 100 items in the form of multiple-choice questions which tests the participants' range of syntactic properties of English. The second test, the VLT (Nation, 1990)

which incorporates five levels of difficulty, was used to test learners' knowledge of English words. The test consists of 90 items. Learners had to choose the right word to go with each meaning in each item. These two tests were carried out a few days before the third component of the instrument was administered. The participants' level of proficiency was determined by combining the scores on both tests. On the basis of a combined score, participants who scored over 80% were grouped as 'advanced level', and those who scored between 66 and 79% as 'intermediate level'.

The Written Paradigm Task by Liszka (2005) was used to test the ESL L1 Chinese students' underlying knowledge of the English simple past (SP) and present perfect (PP). The task incorporated PP and SP items with half of the tokens being real English verbs, representing both regular and irregular forms, and the other half consisting of regular and irregular nonce verbs (based on English phonological templates). The verbs were presented in the infinitive form (base form) together with their definitions at the top of the page, based on some of the forms used by Prasada and Pinker (1993) (see Liszka, 2005).

During the administration of the study task, participants were presented with a 20-page booklet, with six base-form verbs and their definitions at the top of each page, totalling 120 test items of which 54 required the present perfect. Below the definitions were six contexts in which subjects were required to insert one of the verbs in its appropriate form to make the sentence complete. Half of the tokens were real English verbs representing an equal number of regular and regular forms based on English phonological templates, for example, *nop/stop*, *renort/report* (reg) and *kend/bend*, *dind/find* (irreg) and included 12 Prasada and Pinker's (1993) 'prototypical pseudo' verbs (e.g. *plip* (reg) and *spling* (irreg)). The motivation for including nonce verbs was to test whether the learners' morphological processes are similar to native speaker processes, for example, native knowledge of the simple past and present perfect is generative, thus marking can extend indefinitely to any previously unencountered verbs (Liszka, 2005). The nonce verbs tested whether the learners' morphological processes would be the same as the native speakers' knowledge of the simple past and present perfect. Participants were then required to complete the sentences with the correct form of a verb. Examples of both types of verb taken from the test items are given below:

WALK   When you **walk,** you move along by putting one foot in front of the other on the ground.

CRASH   If something **crashes** somewhere, it hits something else violently.

ZOP   If you **zop**, you laugh for five minutes.

PROW   If you **prow**, you reach the other side of somewhere.

1. "Can you hear what the pilot is saying?"
   "Yes, he's announcing that we _____ the Atlantic and we'll be landing in 10 minutes."

2. We _____ all day and my feet are hurting. We still have 3 kilometres to go.

3. I should tell my mother that I _____ her car into a lamp post last week. It will cost 150 pounds to repair the damage.

4. This time, I _____ once too often after hearing your stupid joke.

   (Examples are from Liszka, 2005)

In this task, the participants were required to listen to a recording of the six verbs and their meanings. The participants were to listen and read the definitions at the same time. After that, they filled in the gap in each of the six sentences with the verb which feels right and put the verb in a form which makes the sentence complete. The participants were told to answer the test items as promptly as possible without thinking too hard about it. This is crucial as intuition of the learners is important. In this way, the results would also be more reliable.

The Oral Production Task was used to create an environment in which the present perfect is used (see Appendix). The task was carefully planned in which the participants were given five pictures of people performing everyday tasks. These stimuli were designed to elicit utterances which included the use of simple past and present perfect forms. Questions were posed with the stimuli and learners were required to describe or relate the incident portrayed in each picture by using the words provided in a box. During these sessions, the participants' utterances were recorded. The participants' responses were then transcribed for the verb forms used. Time constraint was not a factor for completion of this task.

Upon transcription, errors in the use of PP and SP were identified. Subsequently, the obligatory contexts in which a particular verb form should be used were determined. Then, the number of verbs with correct form produced was identified. The following formula was used to obtain the frequency of correct use.

Total percentage of correct	=	Total number x 100 produced
use of the PP / SP		Total number of obligatory contexts

Participants

A total of thirty (30) L1 Chinese students sat for the two proficiency tests. Based on their scores, they were grouped into two proficiency levels: intermediate and advanced. The participants of the study were students from four different universities in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The participants were selected based on two criteria. Firstly, their first

language must be one of the Chinese languages which include Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka or Hokkien. Further, they must have attended primary Chinese schools from the age of six. In other words, they possess native-like knowledge of Mandarin Chinese. This study was confined to only L1 Chinese ESL learners because Chinese grammaticalises aspect including the perfect, but it does not have grammaticalised tense. On the other hand, English does have the perfect to encode both aspect and tense. Secondly, they were selected based on their first exposure to the Malay language which was at the age of 7 or younger (see Johnson & Newport, 1998) in vernacular Chinese schools. In fact, they were exposed to only 150 minutes per week of tutored Malay. Hence, the argument that the Chinese speakers might be influenced by the Malay language in their judgement of the English structures may not be valid here (see Wong & Chan, 2007)[6].

Out of the 30 participants, 15 obtained above 80% in the OPT and VLT, and were classified as the advanced group and 15 managed to achieve between 66 and 79% in the tests, forming the intermediate group. The details are summarised in the table below.

TABLE 1
Classification of the participants on the basis of their scores on the OPT and VLT

Proficiency	Range (%)	Number of Learners (N)
Intermediate	66-79	15
Advanced	80 and above	15
Total		**30**

Six of the 30 L1 Chinese students, three from the advanced level and three from the intermediate level, were selected for the Oral Production Task. Together, they formed about 20% of the total number of the participants. Data obtained from this task was to complement the data from the main task, the Written Paradigm Task.

Data Analysis

To compute the collected data, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 12.0 was used. The data were first subjected to Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) to determine whether the statistical techniques that the researchers were considering for data analysis were appropriate. Tests of normality and homogeneity of variance test were used to ensure that the assumption of normality and equality of variance were met. The t-value with equal variances is assumed $[t(28)=4.010]$. The data were later subjected to independent samples t-tests

[6]A reviewer claimed there might be a parasitic effect due to the fact that the Malay language is ubiquitous in the environment. Although this is the case, majority of the courses at the university were conducted in English in the main.

and a parametric test to determine whether the results for the acquisition of the present perfect were significant for the two groups of learners.

RESULTS

The results are presented below according to two levels of proficiency (advanced and intermediate) for both the Written Paradigm and Oral Production tasks.

Written Paradigm Task

The Written Paradigm Task was scored in frequency counts and percentages based on the answers of the respondents. Data for the advanced group (see Fig.1) indicate that the use of simple present is the highest with a percentage of 43.2%. This is followed by the simple past with a percentage of 33.0%. The lowest score is obtained for the present perfect, which is 23.3%. The data for the intermediate group (see Fig.1) indicate that the use of present perfect is the lowest at the level of 6.3%. The score obtained for the simple past is 23.2%. It is interesting

to note that they seemed to fare best with the simple present, i.e. at 70.3%. This score was in fact better than the score for the advanced group. A possible explanation is the simple present seemed to be the default tense for the intermediate group. Therefore, their high score may not have been due to their being accurate but rather to them using the simple present as the main tense. This finding suggests an influence of their L1, which is devoid of inflectional tense morphology. The score for the advanced group on the other hand, suggests the actual acquisition pattern for the ultimate attainment of the more proficient and discerning learners.

The pattern for the L1 Chinese intermediate learners is the same as that found in the L1 Chinese advanced learners. Taken together, the results showed that generally, the L1 Chinese learners, even at the advanced level, had persistent difficulty in the present perfect and it seemed that they had less difficulty with the simple past and the simple present seemed the least difficult for the learners generally.
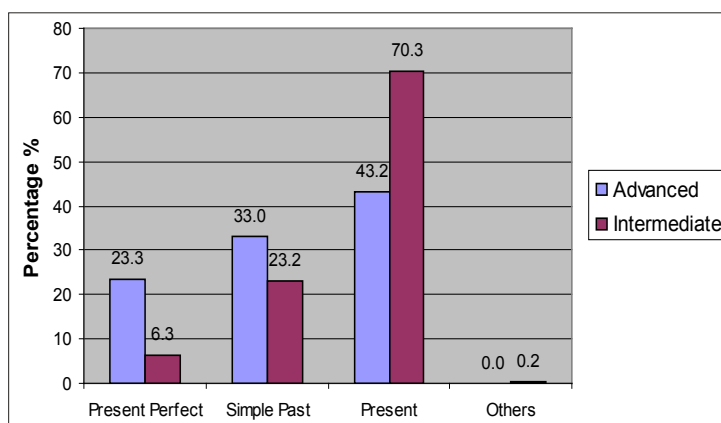

Fig.1: Mean scores in percentages of advanced and intermediate groups in the written paradigm task.

Based on the independent samples t-test, the following results were obtained. There was a significant difference in the correct use of present perfect in the present perfect environments between the advanced and intermediate groups (p=0.0001, sig. 2-tailed). The comparison showed that the advanced learners produced significantly more present perfect forms in present perfect contexts than the intermediate learners. The results indicated that the intermediate learners had difficulty in using present perfect in the present perfect environments. However, it was observed that both levels of learners used relatively less present perfect forms in the present perfect environments. Hence, these results support and are consistent with the fact that learners face difficulty in associating the underlying semantic representation of the English present perfect with its grammatical properties and the difficulty is persistent even at the advanced level, in line with the claim made by Hawkins & Chan (1997) that functional categories and associated features that are not instantiated in the learners' L1 will not be acquired by the learners after a critical period.

Oral Production Task

The Oral Production task was scored in terms of the correct use of present perfect and simple past in frequency counts and percentages. The data in Fig.2 indicate that the highest correct use of simple past for the advanced learners is 100.0% by participant SY. The highest score obtained for the present perfect is 80.0% by participant SW. It is interesting to note that participant SY did not produce any present perfect forms in present perfect environments at all (0%). The performance for the simple past for this same participant was excellent (100.0%). The results indicate that the L1 Chinese advanced learners fare better in the simple past than the present perfect. Overall, the advanced learners used more simple past forms correctly (70.0%) than the present perfect forms (40.0%). The participant SW was an exception, and this could be explained by individual differences and that this learner was certain in his or her acquisition of present perfect.
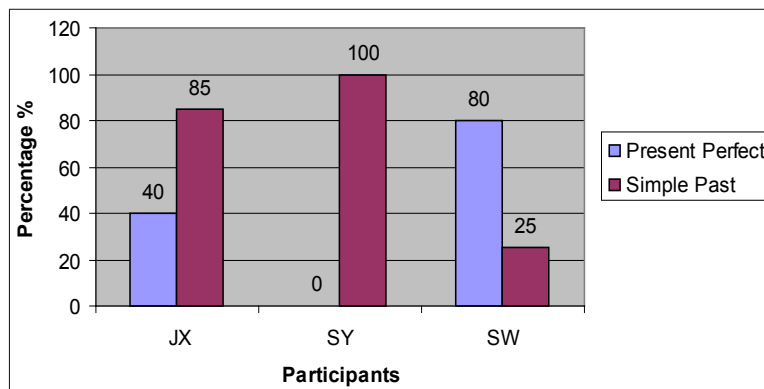

Fig.2: Total correct use of present perfect (pp) and simple past (sp) in % for the advanced learners.

The data in Fig.3 indicate that the highest percentage of correct use of simple past was 93.8% (JT). The highest score obtained for the present perfect was 40.0% (EW). The same participant produced about the same amount of the simple past (38.9%) and the present perfect (40.0%).

The results showed that overall, the L1 Chinese intermediate learners fared better in the simple past (57.8%) than in the present perfect (33.3%). However, it is fair to say that they were still weak in these two forms as the scores were not more that 60%.
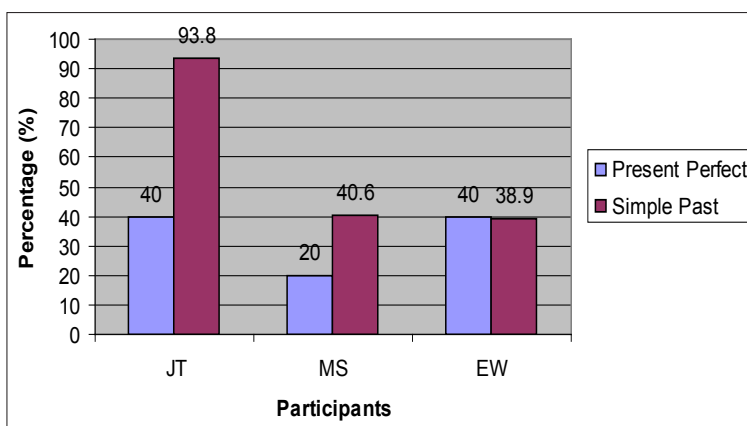

Fig.3: Total correct use of present perfect (pp) and simple past (sp) in % for the intermediate learners.
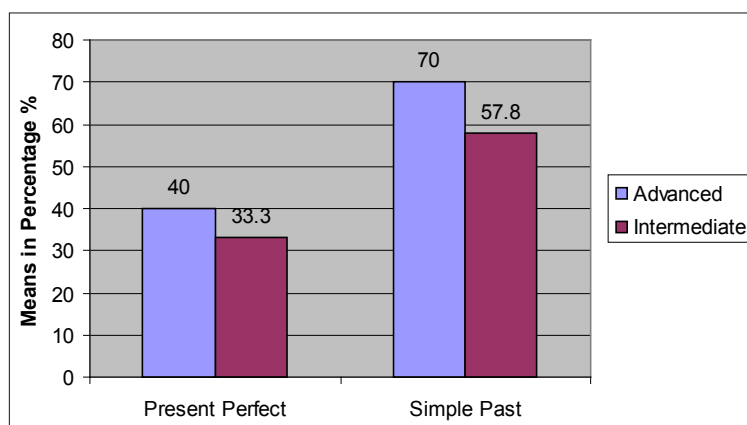

Fig.4: Mean percentage of total correct use of present perfect (pp) and simple past (sp) for the three advanced and the three intermediate learners.

Six of the 30 L1 Chinese students were selected for the oral production task; three from the advanced level and three from the intermediate level. It was observed that

there was variation in the mean scores of present perfect and simple past (see Fig.4) between the two groups of learners. In the case of the advanced group, the difference

in correct production between the present perfect and simple past forms is 30.0% and that for the intermediate group, the figure is 24.5%. The results showed that the pattern for both of the groups is similar, that is the L1 Chinese learners have persistent difficulty in using the present perfect and they seemed to have less difficulty with the simple past. Overall, the L1 Chinese learners had performed better on the simple past (70.0% Advanced and 57.8% Intermediate) than the present perfect (40.0% Advanced and 33.3% Intermediate). Generally, they do become more proficient in the simple past with increased proficiency. The pattern of production in the Oral Production Task for the L1 Chinese learners is the same as that found in the Written Paradigm Task, i.e. the two groups of learners did not fare well in the present perfect.

Based on the independent samples t-test, no significant difference was registered in the correct production of the present perfect of the advanced and intermediate levels (p=0.795, sig. 2 tailed). That is the advanced and intermediate learners did not differ significantly in the frequency of correct use of the present perfect. However, the advanced learners were able to correctly use the present perfect more than the intermediate learners. The results indicated that the advanced learners had used the correct present perfect forms below chance level (set at 50%). Overall, these results suggest that although there is a general pattern in terms of acquisition of the Simple Past and Present Perfect, exceptions among individual participants are also

observed. Nevertheless these results also support the fact that learners face difficulty in associating the underlying semantic representation of the English present perfect with its grammatical properties and the result here is in line with the result obtained from the Written Paradigm Task.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the instruments used and the procedure of data collection are similar to those used by Liszka (2005). The L1 group in this study was different from that of Liszka's in that it was a homogenous group (L1 Chinese speakers) at two proficiency levels, advanced and intermediate, while Liszka's sample comprised both advanced and intermediate L1 Chinese and Spanish speakers.

In Liszka's study (2005), the Chinese participants alternated between the simple past and present, where the present perfect was undergeneralised. She found that although there was no significant difference between their use of the simple past, the advanced learners' use of the present was significantly different from that of the intermediate learners'. The findings of Liszka's study suggest that the learners in her study had not fully integrated past and present meaning that underlies the present perfect form in a native-like way. The results in this present study are in line with those of Liszka's as the results obtained in this study support the fact that learners face difficulty in associating the underlying semantic representation of the English present perfect with its grammatical properties.

Liszka (p. 57) further states that the condition which hinders native-like form-meaning associations is related to the parametric syntactic features ([+/- perfect] and [+/-past] for T) that underlie (E_S, R) and an absence of one or both of these properties. The overuse of the present for both levels in this study (see Fig. 1) is accounted for by the L1 lacking a grammaticalised deictic element. The use of the simple past is problematic for the same reason that Chinese does not specify [+/-past].

One possible reason for the unexpected use of the past concerns another parametric difference between English and Chinese. Liszka (2004) suggested that the simple past is used as a perfective aspect marker rather than a past marker in the present perfect contexts. As the English perfect encodes both aspect and tense, the lack of tense representation and use of the English present perfect, for example, in the case of undergeneralisation in the use of present perfect caused the overuse of the present among the intermediate learners at 70.3% (see Fig.1). This is directly attributable to the influence of the learners' L1, i.e. the fact that the perfective aspect is encoded by the *V-le* suffix. This suggests that where the simple past is used for a native present perfect, it is used as a marker of perfective aspect, rather than past meaning (Liszka, 2004).

According to the study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig (1997a), the present perfect emerges late in L2 learners, and it could be argued that form-meaning associations are incomplete at the intermediate level.

Nevertheless, in this study, the low score of the present perfect of 23.3% (see Fig.1) for the advanced learners indicated that the L1 Chinese speakers had difficulty in assigning the full range of interpretations even at the advanced level in English, a result that seems to stem from the parametric variation between the two languages.

Based on the discussion thus far, it seems that L1 influence is a possible reason to explain the learners' selection of either the simple past or present perfect. The first language has always been thought to be a barrier to a learner as he/she learns a L2. This phenomenon is commonly identified as "interference", a situation where previous learning of the L1 influences the acquisition of the L2 (Brown, 1987:81). This is of relevance to the findings of this study. In Chinese, references to temporality can be ambiguous, and multiple interpretations of temporality within the discourse frame can be allowed and tolerated because temporality in Chinese is context dependent. Chinese verbs have no overt tense and agreement morphology. Out of context, bare finite verbs can refer to past, present or future events (Tsang, 2003). Data obtained from the Oral Production Test have shown that participants failed to identify the past events which affected the situation that exists now. Interestingly, one particular participant did not seem to be able to produce any present perfect form throughout the Oral Production Task as illustrated below:

Picture 1

Respondent (SY) -Advanced: *It was a bad day. I brought the wrong food to the*

customers and I broke a lot of dishes and no one left me any tips. But now I lose the job.

Picture 2

Respondent (SY) -Advanced: *Things wasn't going very well yesterday. I didn't sell any daisies and I sent the customers the wrong flowers. I even spoilt the roses. And now I lose the business.*

Picture 5

Respondent (SY) -Advanced: *Just now I ran over a red light. I hit into a tree and I drove down a one-way street. Now the policeman gave me a ticket.*

The responses above indicate that the learner did not know how to identify temporal meanings with the time expression *now* and appears to interpret time references differently. Moreover, the learner continued to produce the same error throughout the task. The learner's L1 system was incomplete, a phenomenon known as incomplete success (Towell & Hawkins, 1994, p.2; Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 13), i.e. learners go on learning but the learner's system ceases to make progress no matter how actively the learner tries to understand the time reference that underlies the present perfect.

A final problem commonly observed is learners' utterances seemed to vary from time to time, in the types of 'errors' made, and learners seemed to switch between a range of correct and incorrect forms over lengthy periods of time (Towell & Hawkins 1994, p.5). The utterance below indicates there was variability in the participant's

production of the L2, at least in the present perfect form. In this instance, the participant was indeterminate, allowing a deviant form of present perfect form while being able to produce the appropriate forms at the same time in the other sentences.

Picture 3

Respondent (EV) -Intermediate: *Just now, things are not go very well as I not sell any daisies. I have sent customers the wrong flowers and I had spoilt the roses. So now, I have lose my business.*

Taken together, the data supports a suggestion put forth by Liszka (2005). She explored the alternative possibility that Chinese speakers cannot establish [±past] on T(ense) in English precisely because this feature is absent in their L1. The following example is an utterance produced by one of the participants in the Oral Production Task where the use of present perfect was left out even with the obvious presence of time expression "now". This indicates that the participant did not adequately understand the actual meaning of the present perfect.

Picture 5

Respondent (SW) -Advanced: *Just now I run a red light and that's why I hit a tree and in the end I drive down a one-way street. So, now the police man just gave me a ticket.*

Further, the study indicates the Chinese ESL learners alternate between simple past and present in the present perfect environments even at the advanced level. One possible reason is the condition

which hinders native-like form-meaning associations, that is the parametric syntactic features ([+/- perfect] and [+/- past] for T) that underlie (E_S, R). It could be concluded that influence from their L1 had resulted in difficulty for the participants to have the right perceptions of English temporal reference. The participants' production of the correct and incorrect forms interchangeably affirmed that there was variability in the production of L2.

Thus, generally, the findings of this study are compatible with those observedreported by Liszka (2005). The persistent difficulty is the result of a representational deficit arising from L1-L2 parametric differences in the use of the present perfect among Chinese ESL learners. It can be assumed that the L1 Chinese L2 English learners face persistent difficulty in acquiring the English present perfect that corresponds to the native-like acquisition of underlying form-meaning relationships even at the advanced level of L2 proficiency, thus supporting the FFFH (Hawkins & Chan, 1997).

The findings form the study have implications for pedagogy. Teachers play an important role in instilling interest in learning and helping learners to acquire a particular grammatical property in the L2. It is the responsibility of a teacher to relate the learner's L1 to the L2 for learners in an effort to help learners overcome the persistent difficulty they face. A comparison between the advanced and intermediate levels would serve to identify the similarities and differences in their performance. This input would be relevant for ESL instructors to enhance existing teaching materials or to produce new materials in order to trigger unconscious development in this aspect of the grammar (Hawkins, 2005a).

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APPENDIX

Look at the pictures. Tell a story of each picture by using the words provided in the box.

Picture 1

Bad day – bring wrong food – break a lot of dishes – no one leave me tips	Lose the job
Yesterday	**Now**

Picture 2

Lose three brushes – fall off the ladder – put my foot in a paint can	Quit the job
Last Friday	**Now**

Picture 3

Things not go very well – not sell any daisies – send customers the wrong flowers – spoil the roses	Lose the business
Just now	**Now**

Picture 4

Sleep through the alarm twice – the guard dog bite me	Lose confidence
Last night	**Now**

Picture 5

Run a red light – hit a tree – drive down a one-way street	Policeman – give me – ticket
Just now	**Now**