

An Empirical Study on Tense

時態之實證研究

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Abstract

Without morphological tense marking devices in Mandarin Chinese, most Chinese ESL/EFL learners seem to have great difficulties mastering the tense system in the beginning of learning the target language. To express temporality, Chinese ESL/EFL learners tend to depend mainly on temporal adverbials, aspectual markers as well as pragmatic principles during the process of acquiring tense marking. Hence this study attempts to investigate whether or not 1) the amount of tense errors that learners make is related to their level of English proficiency, and 2) the kinds of tense errors that learners make is related to their level of proficiency. The subjects were four Chinese ESL learners, two of whom were at Intermediate Level (IML I & II) and two at Beginning Level (BL I & II). Informal interviews were conducted in natural contexts by a native speaker of American English. The purpose of the interview was simply to get each subject to talk as much as they possibly could. Each interview was then transcribed in English orthography by the researcher. The findings revealed that all subjects, despite their different levels of proficiency, seemed to have great trouble with past tense marking. In examining the subjects' oral production data, it is discovered that they often used present tense in utterances where the past tense should have been employed, that they were inclined to shift occasionally from one tense to another, and thus produced tense errors. However, they all showed greater strength in producing the present tense. In spite of this, it should be noted that there are some limitations of this study which will be pointed out for future research work. Some pedagogical implications drawn from this study will be discussed as well.

Keywords: morphological tense marking, temporality, temporal adverbials, aspectual markers, pragmatic principles

摘 要

漢語沒有像英語有形態學的時態標記，因此多數中國英語學習者開始學英文時似乎會有時態上的困難。為了表達時間概念，中國英語學習者特別依賴時間狀語、體標記及語用原則。因此本研究目的旨在探討時態錯誤的量及時態錯誤的類型是否與英語學習者的英語程度有關。研究對象為四位中國英語學習者，其中二位是中級英語程度而另二位是初級英語程度。由一位英語母語人士進行非正式的訪談，訪談的主要目的是讓每位研究對象盡可能多說英語。研究結果顯示中國英語學習者儘管英語程度的不同皆有動詞過去式標記上的困難，中國英語學習者常常會將現在式誤用在過去式之中而且時態經常切換因而造成時態錯誤，然而中國英語學習者在現在式的應用上普遍表現不錯。本研究的局限及研究結果之教學意涵將予以討論並提出改進建議。

關鍵字：形態學, 時態標記, 時間狀語, 體標記, 語用原則

Introduction

In the field of research into Second Language Acquisition, considerable attention has recently been paid to the linguistic expression of a number of conceptual domains, including temporal relations in particular (Stutterheim 1986, Bhardwaj, Dietrich and Noyau 1988, Bernini and Giacalone Ramat 1990, etc.). It is well-known that the linguistic codification of temporal relations varies significantly from language to language, ranging from languages with no morphological devices to express location in time to languages which have different tenses and tense marking devices, such as auxiliaries, suffixes, and stem modifications. In this continuum, Mandarin Chinese belongs to those languages which have no verb inflections, while Italian, on the other hand, has a richer and more complex inflectional verb morphology.

In English, there are several ways of expressing temporality: adverbials of various sorts, the inherent temporal meaning of the verb, and verbal morphology (Schumann, 1987). Among them, the morphological marking of time is considered the most difficult area to overcome in L2 learning. The main reason for this is that not all languages have a system of morphological tense marking comparable to the English language. The English language uses verb affixes to signal the relation between the time of the occurrence of the situation and the time that situation is brought up in speech (tense). By contrast, unlike English, some languages such as Mandarin and Thai have no formal

tense opposition nor a grammatical past tense. Temporality is thus expressed by means quite different from the English tense system. In Mandarin, past time interpretation is made via lexical means, aspectual markers or pragmatic principles or a combination thereof (Smith & Erbaugh, 2005). Time reference may optionally be marked lexically using time adverbs (Smith & Erbaugh, 2005). For example, (2) demonstrates the lack of a past tense morpheme within a sentence referring to a past event.

- (2) a. ta zuotian you ke
b. he yesterday have class (Tie & Lance, 1986)
c. (English translation of (2)) “He had classes yesterday.” (Tie & Lance, 1986)

Pragmatic interpretation plays a large role in Mandarin as the pastness of an event is often understood through context rather than being coded linguistically (Smith & Erbaugh, 2005) as that in English. Indeed, Kumpf (1984) in his study of temporal systems in inter-language illustrates that all languages, it seems, have aspectual designations, but not all languages have tense distinctions. Since the L1 differs remarkably from the target language system, the researchers assume that in the acquisition of verb tense-aspect, the beginning L2 learners may have little or no awareness of the rules governing the use of verbal morphology to express temporality.

As described above, tense marking is one of the several ways used to express temporality in English. However, since not all languages have morphemes for signaling tense as those in English, it seems reasonable to expect that learners from such language groups may have a great deal of difficulty mastering the English tense system. In this paper, the researchers attempt to examine how Chinese learners of English as a Second Language deal with tense in their target language. The researchers expect learners at different levels of proficiency to have various controls over tense in terms of quantity and quality. The term “quantity” refers to the amount of tense errors that learners make, whereas “quality” the types of tense errors. Most American grammarians (e.g. Celce-Muria & Larsen-Freeman and Quirk & Greenbaum) claim that the English language has only two tense forms: present (non-past) and past. As far as this paper is concerned, the future tense will also be included in the study of tense. The entire study is conducted on the following research questions:

- Q1. Is the amount of tense errors that learners make related to their level of English proficiency?
- Q2. Are the kinds of tense errors that learners make related to their level of English proficiency?

The paper is organized as follows: first) a literature review on tense, second) a description of the subjects, third) the method used to collect data, and fourth) the discussion of results. On the basis of these findings, pedagogical implications, the limitations of the present study and recommendations for further research are provided.

Literature Studies on Tense

In one important study, Godfrey (1980) examined tense marking in the speech data of 20 adult ESL students from a discourse-level perspective. Speakers produced errors when they failed to maintain the tense continuity. He modified Chafe's framework (1972) and defined a "tense continuity" as "the realization of a temporary tense constraint in verbs with corresponding tense". Once a tense is initiated representing a particular temporal reference central to the topic, the tense will continue until the topic is exhausted (Godfrey, p. 94). When errors in tense marking were scored in relation to these tense continuities, he found that the "error rates" were higher for more advanced learners than beginning learners. This finding contradicted the expectation that learners at a more advanced level of proficiency have fewer error rates than those at beginning-level. Godfrey suggested that there are a number of factors that contribute to this deviation in expected error rates. These factors are as follows: 1) avoidance of verb marking; 2) a speaker's lack of awareness of morphological tense marking; 3) attention limitations (e.g. the intrusion of forms immune to a continuity, intrusion of secondary, subtopic continuities, embeddings, neighboring tenses, and episode boundaries; 4) types of topic continuity established; and 5) degree of difficulty in maintaining a particular continuity. Godfrey's method of analyzing tense marking is to examine the fluctuations of past and present tense forms in both narrative and non-narrative tasks in which a particular tense continuity should be in effect (by his definition). The fluctuations are then scored as errors.

Kumpf (1984) examines temporal systems in inter-language. She used a "discourse-functional" approach to inter-language analysis in which the forms used in the data were indexed to a particular context in discourse. Her goal was to approach

inter-language as systematic in and of itself. One assumption was that in inter-language discourse, speakers control a range of possible structures for a given context, and “choose” to present certain ones for certain purposes (Kumpf, 1984). First, Kumpf analyzed tense marking in narratives of a Japanese woman who had acquired English in an untutored situation. Then, she coded the discourse structures by dividing them into foreground and background clauses. Later, she showed how they correlated with characteristics such as discourse structure, aspect, verb types, clause types, and time reference. From her analysis, she concluded that in this subject’s inter-language system, tense is not employed when referring to completed action, but it is used to refer to stated and to non-completed action. Kumpf’s research revealed that differing uses of tense marking are attributed to the system of the inter-language, and function within that system, although they may function in other ways within the second language.

Unlike the previous two studies which focused upon higher-level discourse constraints, Wolfram (1985) examined lower-level constraints on tense marking, such as phonological or morphological form. Tense marking was analyzed according to whether or not a native speaker of a mainstream dialect of English would be expected to use a past tense form in a particular instance. Analyzing tense marking (typically past tense) in interviews of 16 Vietnamese speakers learning English as a second language, an investigator identified all those cases in which past tense would be required based on the rules of Standard English tense marking. The analysis then revealed that tense marking is a highly variable phenomenon and that there are a number of surface constraints that systematically affect this variability, including the distinction between regular and irregular verbs, the shape of the suffix on the regular verb, the following phonological environment, the type of irregular formation, and the relative frequency of the verb form. From his analysis, Wolfram concluded that lower-level constraints cannot be ignored in the study of tense marking in second language acquisition data, and that the analysis of tense marking in terms of higher-level language organization must take into consideration these kinds of surface constraints if it hopes to provide a valid, empirically based account of tense marking alternation in inter-language.

Schumann (1987) examined the expression of temporality in basilectal speech (the earliest stage of second language development) from three perspectives: morphology, semantics, and pragmatics. Analyzing the data, he found that temporality is expressed through discourse pragmatics in early inter-language. The verb morphology is not used to make temporal reference although it does exist in the basilectal speech. This finding

showed that there is a stage prior to either aspect or tense where learners rely solely on the pragmatic functions of adverbials (e.g. now, tomorrow, always, prepositional phrases, etc), calendric expressions (e.g. dates, days of the week, months, and numbers), sequentiality, and context (implicit reference) to express temporality.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the following research questions:

- 1) Is the amount of tense errors that learners make related to their levels of proficiency?
- 2) Are the kinds of tense errors that learners make related to their levels of proficiency?

Method

In the present study, informal interviews were conducted with each subject. Most of the questions in the interviews were mainly concerned with the past tense and future tense. Subjects were interviewed in natural contexts (typically in their dorm rooms) and at their best convenience. Each of the interviews lasted approximately half an hour, was taped-recorded, and then transcribed. The purpose of the interview was simply to get each individual subject to talk as much as possible in a relatively informal, natural environment. All interviews were conducted by a native speaker of American English. The researcher simply served as a field worker, who occasionally helped with translation. For the most part, the interviews were conducted in English though there were occasional switches to Chinese.

Each interview was transcribed in English orthography by the researcher. Then, a graduate student in Linguistics, a native speaker of American English, helped identify all those cases in which the present tense, past tense, and future tense would be required based on the general rules of Standard English tense system. Cases in which the subject employed the correct tense, but chose the wrong word (e.g. I aren't going to any place.) or got the correct tense, but failed to supply aspect (e.g. I will be go back.) were scored as "correct" since the primary goal of the present research was to examine tense only. In addition, cases in which the subject systematically dropped verbs (e.g. My wife _____ also in the college.) were eliminated from the tabulation because of the difficulty in determining whether the present tense, past tense, or future tense would be applied.

Subjects

The subjects in this study were four Chinese learners of English as a Second

Language. Of the four subjects, three were enrolled in a noncredit Intensive English Program (IEP) at Indiana University and one was a wife of a graduate student at Indiana University. All subjects had completed secondary education in their respective countries. One had completed graduate work in Fine Arts; one had received a bachelor degree in Electrical Engineering, and one in Child Education. Among the four subjects, two were males and two females. Two were from the People's Republic of China and two from Taiwan. At the time of data collecting, the subjects differed in terms of the amount of time they had spent in the United States. One had been in the US for as short as ten days, one for six months, and two for three months. Moreover, regarding each individual subject's level of English proficiency, two were at Intermediate Level (IML I & II) and two at Beginning Level (BL I & II). The only subject not enrolled in the Intensive English Program was considered at BL II because she was currently attending a beginning-level English class taught by students in Linguistics Practicum.

Results

TABLE 1

TOTAL PRODUCTION OF ANSWERS

SUBJECT A: Yu, BL I

SUBJECT B: Xiao-Quing, BL II

SUBJECT C: Cong, IML I

SUBJECT D: Yen, IML II

N	= Number
%	= Percentage
Corr	= Correct
Ans	= Answers

SUB	Corr Ans		Incorr Ans		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A	34	77.27	10	22.73	44	100
B	94	77.21	38	28.79	132	100
C	54	45.00	66	55.00	120	100
D	85	77.98	24	22.02	109	100

The above table shows each subject’s performance on the number and percentage of both correct and incorrect answers that he/she made. Taking subject A for example, this table reveals that subject A produced a total number of 44 answers (tense). Of these 44 (=100%), she made 10 or 22.73% tense errors, but 34 or 77.27% she used tense correctly. This table also shows that among all subjects, subject C made the most tense errors. Of his total production of tense (N=120), he produced 66 or 55% tense errors. Subject D had slightly lower errors than subjects A and B. All subjects, except for subject C at IML I, used tense correctly greater than 70%. The results of this study indicated that the number of tense errors that learners made did not seem quite related to their levels of proficiency. Results which are classified by types of tense are shown in **Table 2**.

TABLE 2

SUBJECTS’ TOTAL PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENT TENSE FORMS

Subject Type		A	B	C	D
		Present	N	27	107
%	61.36		81.06	90.83	77.98
Past	N	7	16	9	15
	%	15.91	12.12	7.5	13.76
Future	N	10	9	2	9
	%	22.73	6.82	1.67	8.26
Total	N	44	132	120	109
	%	100	100	100	100

Taking subject B for example, **Table 2** shows that of her total production of tense system (N=132), subject B used present tense 81.06% of the time (107 out of 132 productions), 12.12% of the time on past tense (16 out of 132 productions), and 6.82% of the time on future tense (9 out of 132 productions). Strikingly similar, all subjects at different levels of proficiency used present tense over 60% of the time, which was a lot more frequently than the other tense forms. Another interesting finding was that when compared with other subjects, subject A had the most frequent use of future tense, whereas subject C had the least. Amazingly enough, subject A also used past tense slightly more often than subjects D (=13.76%), B (=12.12%), and C (=7.5%).

TABLE 3

SUBJECT	TYPE	TOTAL POSSIBLE	ACTUAL PRODUCED	%
A	Present	17	17	100
	Past	17	7	41.18
	Future	10	10	100
B	Present	71	70	98.59
	Past	52	15	28.85
	Future	9	9	100
C	Present	43	43	100
	Past	73	9	12.33
	Future	4	2	50
D	Present	63	62	100
	Past	35	14	40
	Future	11	9	81.82

Table 3 reveals data on each tense classification for each subject. Taking subject C for example. This table shows that as judged by the native English-speaking informant, subject C had 43 chances to use present tense and he used them all correctly (=100%). However, he had 73 chances to use past tense, but he only produced past tense 9 out of 73 times (= 12.33%). Similarly, he had 4 chances to use future tense, but he only produced future tense 2 out of 4 times (= 50%). This indicated that subject C had the lowest control over past tense, and thus produced more past tense errors. It was also found that all subjects, despite their various levels of proficiency, seemed to have the least control over past tense. Subject A produced past tense 7 out of 17 times (=41.18%), subject B 15 out of 52 times (=28.85%), subject C 9 out of 73 times (=12.33%), and subject D 14 out of 35 times (=40%). Compared with all subjects, subject C at IML I had the lowest control over past tense, whereas subject A at BL I had the highest (but only slightly higher than subject D). Subjects A and B seemed to have a better control over future tense than subjects C and D. However, the numbers for future tense were relatively small. It was hard, therefore, to make a general statement such as the above. All subjects, as a whole, had a good control over present tense.

Discussion

The research findings in this study revealed that all subjects, though their different levels of proficiency, seemed to have had great difficulty controlling the past tense in their target language. Nevertheless, they showed greater strength in producing the present tense. There might be one possible explanation for their lack of control over past tense. Unlike English, Mandarin has no markers for tense (Li & Thompson, 1981). To distinguish temporality, such as the present time, past time, and future time, native Mandarin-Chinese speakers may have to solely rely on “context”. A statement like “Wo chu tu shu kuan tu shu” (I go library study book) can be interpreted either in the present tense, or past tense, or future tense if no context is provided. In other words, without context of some sort, a single statement such as the above would be considered “ambiguous” because it has no tense distinction at all. When no context is added, the time reference in Mandarin is most likely “left up to the hearer”. Since the language has no tense system or tense distinction as that in English, Chinese learners of English as a Second Language may have little or no awareness of expressing temporality by means of the English tense system. In fact, in examining our subjects’ oral production data, it was discovered that they often used present tense in utterances where the past tense should have been employed. They also tended to shift occasionally from one tense to another, especially in adverbial clauses, and thus produced tense errors. This frequent shift between verb tenses was particularly evident as shown in subject B. Subject C, on the other hand, was more inclined to systematically drop verbs in his utterances, but interestingly enough, he used “time words” in sentence-initial position such as “before” and “after” to indicate the sequence of events (see #10, #34, & #40).

I. Subject B: Xiao-Quing

(3)	When I <i>was</i> in China, I <i>am</i> a engineering, electrical engineering in a factory.
(4)	I <i>work</i> in the factory for four years.
(5)	I <i>do</i> some technical ... Um, my major job <i>is</i> improve some advantage machines from the other countries ...
(6)	Before I <i>went</i> to the factory, I <i>am</i> a student, a university student.
(7)	... I <i>major</i> in Automation of Industry. I <i>belong</i> to the Computer Science and Automation Department.
(9)	Yeah. When I <i>went</i> to the university, I <i>am</i> 17 years old.

(57)	Yeah. When we <i>finish</i> our high school, we all <i>pass</i> the examination. So I <i>go</i> to Chong Qin, Chong Qin University. He <i>go</i> to the ... um ... the Science and Technical University in Hou Fei, Han Hui Province. I <i>go</i> to Shi Chuan Province.
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II. Subject C: Cong

(5)	... I ... um in 1986, I get a Master's degree about Fine Arts.
(10)	Yes. <i>Before</i> I to Nai Jin, I just in my home. ... <i>After</i> in Nai Jin, I just in Nai Jin College of Arts ...
(18)	... because in our country, I ... I am very busy teaching. Also I need study. I need painting. ... but I often travel in our country because I just take my students to study traditions, Chinese painting. So I need take them many ... a lot of ancient place in our country. Every year I have chance to visit my country. But I also take them climb mountains because I need to go to other side to drawing, to sketch mountains and water and house
(32)	... Because I in our country have a lecture status ...
(34)	... <i>Before</i> I to here, I need my country government agree ...
(40)	... Um, <i>before</i> I to America, I just study on year (English). Yes, because when I in the high school, my country is ... big Cultural Revolution.
(41)	... I can't study English. So in the undergraduate school, I also not study English. Because I study Chinese painting, just study Ancient Chinese, I needn't study English. But when I into graduate school, it need pass English test. In ... um ... to test, I just study sixty ... sixty days ... sixty days English (laugh). But graduate school also need high English level, I just get ... very little. So I into a graduate school very difficult. But all my painting, my Ancient Chinese, my Culture is very good. So I to America, I also need past the TOFEL (laugh) ...
(51)	If I is bigger man, maybe I need into the Revolution. Because a lot of people is older man, they are into Revolution. So they ... lost time to study. So they can't into college, can't into graduate school.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of the present study may have some relevance for ESL/EFL pedagogy. As mentioned earlier, as opposed to English, Mandarin is well accepted as a tenseless language with no morphological inflections to mark time (Smith, 1991). To express temporality, it relies heavily on temporal adverbials and aspectual markers. Thus, it is common to hear a Chinese student say a sentence like “I yesterday go to school.” Since tense marking does not exist in such languages, it is of great importance for teachers of English to become aware of the essential role of input in tense-aspect acquisition as well as classroom instruction. Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that ESL learners whose L1 lacks a grammatical past tense, such as Mandarin, may need extra instruction and practice with the English simple past tense in the classroom which promotes noticing of this grammatical category.

A number of instruction methods have been proposed in terms of tense-aspect pedagogy. In her study, Bardovi-Harlig (1995) reports that the input flood technique, which provides students with positive evidence of the target structure through meaning-focused activities does benefit ESL learners in their temporal markings. However, as Sharwood-Smith (1981) argues, it may not lead to acquisition if learners just process the input for meaning. Therefore, in our teaching practice, input can be enhanced so as to make it more salient to the learners by using such techniques as underlining, italicizing, bolding, coloring, etc. Nevertheless, as J. White (1991) points out, even though input enhancement could be a valuable technique to draw learners’ attention to the target form in the input, it may not be effective when the target structure involves L1-L2 contrasts. He further suggests that more negative evidence be needed to make the target structure more salient in the input. While many teachers are eager to embrace the current pedagogical view that communicative-based, meaning-driven instruction is the most beneficial to L2 learners, they are also frustrated to see the unsatisfactory level of accuracy in learners. One possible interpretation is that learners are often left unaware of the errors they make because their non-target like production tends to be easily overlooked by the instructors so long as there is no communication breakdown. To solve this problem, it is deemed necessary for teachers to provide explicit negative evidence by pointing out the source of error as well as offering further explanation in order to raise learners’ awareness of it.

Conclusion and Future Research

Although the research findings showed that all subjects at different levels of proficiency experienced great difficulty controlling the past tense in their target language (see **Table 3**), the researchers were uncertain whether or not this phenomenon was due to L1 influence. The subjects in the present study were merely all native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. There were no other language groups to give confirmatory evidence in this aspect. More investigations need to be undertaken in order to examine on the issue of L1 influence. Aside from this, there is one potential problem that may result from the current research methodology. That is, the researchers did not know whether the subjects in this study were influenced by the experimenter's (interviewer's) language use (e.g. use of tense). For instance, the subjects might simply repeat phrases from the interviewer's questions. If so, the results would be varied should the interviewer use open-ended statements like "Tell me what you plan to do after graduation." Hence, it is suggested that future research work take this into consideration. What is more, this is clearly a preliminary study which involves only a small number of participants. Since the sample size was small, the study needs to be replicated in order to allow any confidence in the generalizability of its findings. In conclusion, as Ellis (2004) argues, there is always a distinction between possessing the knowledge itself and the ability to verbalize it, regardless of whether the learner possesses the meta-language. In the future, a larger sample will be used for more qualitative evidence. In spite of these limitations, it is hoped that this study generates some useful insights into the field of second language acquisition.

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