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臺灣大學生使用英文動詞時式時態之形式、涵意及功能

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A Study of Forms, Meanings, and Functions in the Interlanguage Temporal System of College Learners of English in Taiwan

INTRODUCTION

It's been observed that Chinese learners exhibit considerable difficulty in using English tense and aspect correctly and appropriately. One generally agreed assumption for the cause of this interlanguage phenomenon is that Chinese learners' inaptitude in applying English tense and aspect is due largely to the fact that Chinese speakers do not share the notions of speech time and time duration of the native speakers of English (Yu, 1997). Furthermore, unlike English's inflected tensed verbs, verbs in Mandarin lack the grammatical markers--morphological inflections of tense and aspect—to mark the time of events or to indicate the time progression of events. As indicated by Levinson (1983), Mandarin is a "tenseless language." To signal the change of time reference, Mandarin relies principally on the global context and the temporal adverbials and metrical time expressions such as *gang* (*gang*) "just now," *qunian* "last year," "xiawu," "in the afternoon" "san-dianzhong," and "(at) three o'clock" when indicating the past time of the occurrences (Li & Thompson, 1981, pp. 320-21). Such differences in handling temporal relationships are believed to be one of the major causes of the tense problems of Chinese learners of English (Yu, 1997).

However, the nonexistence of tense markers in Mandarin and L1 interference may only explain some of the tense problems of Chinese learners of English. Another source of Chinese learners' difficulty in acquiring English tense and aspect may come from the complexity and inconsistency of English tense usages. For example, English present-tense verb may be used to indicate not only an event that happens at the present time, but also something that occurs in the past or the future. One case in point is the use of historical present, which was found to have caused confusion in the use of English tense by nonnative learners of English (see Wolfson, 1982b). Another example is the use of the past tense in the here-and-now request to show the intention and courtesy of the speaker. This special use of the past tense also brings confusion to L2 learners of English.

With the tense problem such a thorny issue for English learners here, it's necessary to conduct a systematic investigation upon the interlanguage data directly in order to identify the potential sources of the problems. And it stands reason to assume that factors other than the influence of Mandarin are contributable to Chinese learners' difficulty in learning English tense and aspect.

Purpose of the Study

This study attempts to identify the interlanguage T-A forms generated by adult college learners of English in Taiwan. It is reasonable to expect the temporal systems of both the L1 and the L2 play some role in the Chinese learners' acquisition of the temporal system of the target language. This study focuses primarily on how the forms, meanings, and functions of English T-A forms interact to lead to the acquisition of the L2 English temporal system by the Chinese learners.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects consist of 129 students from different departments of Chinese Culture University. They are placed in three groups with different levels of proficiency.

Instruments

Four tasks are applied in this study. They are a proficiency test, a cloze passage, a multiple-choice test, and a narrative composition.

RESULTS

Aspects and Forms of T-A Components Are Sources of Problems

The general picture of how the Chinese college EFL learners used T-A expressions emerges in the cloze test. In general, most of the college learners have acquired the concept of temporality in English, which is revealed in the fact that in 75.7% of the instances, the tense was employed correctly. In these instances, the learners knew when they should use the past tense and when they shouldn't. The learners' application of aspect, however, is less satisfactory. There were only 66.7% of correct usages. And the forms of the T-A components posed the biggest challenge for the college EFL learners. There were only 55.4% of correct usages (see Table 1). The paired t-tests show that the differences among the means of these three respects are significant. The fact seems to contradict the prediction that Chinese learners acquire the correct forms prior to their appropriate meanings. It's possible that the Chinese adult learners had benefited from their well-established concept of temporality via the L1 Chinese and their general development in cognition. And it is the complexity and unfamiliarity of the English aspect and the triviality and irregularity of the forms of T-A components that have troubled them most in their acquisition of L2 English temporal system.

Table 1: The percentage of the use of tense, aspect, and form in cloze test

T-A Units \ Usage	Tense	Aspect	Form
Correct usage	75.7%	66.7%	55.4%
Incorrect usage	24.3%	33.3%	44.6%

It is necessary to understand in depth how the Chinese learners applied L2 English temporality system by delving into individual instances of T-A expressions in the cloze test and the compositions. The findings from the cloze test suggest the following phenomena:

Forms of T-A Expressions are the major problem for the Chinese EFL learners

The forms of T-A units posed the biggest challenge for the Chinese EFL adult learners. The learners' performances over the verbs "hit," "shake," "occur," "trap," and "send" in the cloze indicate that the morphological changes of these verbs caused significant difficulty in the Chinese EFL learners when using English T-A expressions. As shown in table 1, there are as many as 44.6% of the incorrect uses of forms for the T-A components, more than the improper applications of the tense (24.3%) and the aspect (33.3%).

A look into the individual items in the cloze reveals that it is the changes of the forms of the irregular verbs that caused the biggest trouble (please see Table 2). With blank 5, "hitted" was used in 26 instances and "hited" appeared twice. Totally, 20.2% of the learners used the incorrect form "hitted" rather than the correct form "hit," among which 17% (22 cases) of the learners used it to express the simple past tense of the verb. The finding, however, suggests that although these learners were overgeneralizing the regular form for the past tense (with *-ed* morpheme), they had acquired correct concept of the tense. They were using the simple past tense as required, even though with the wrong forms.

The learners' performances over blank 7 reveal the same tendency. The past form or the past participle of "shake" was written as "shaked" in 79 instances. That is, about 61.2% of the learners used the wrong form of the simple past tense or the past perfect tense of the verb. The performances over other verbs such as "occur" in blank 11, "trap" in blank 14, and "send" in blank 17 all suggest that the irregular changes of the form of the past tense of verbs was a major source of EFL Chinese learners' difficulty with English temporal system. The wrong form "occured" appeared 84 times, about 65.1% of the total usages of the item. That is, more than half of the learners used the incorrect morpheme in the verb expression, which again was the result of the overgeneralization of the regular change of the past tense form. "Traped" was used in 22 instances, accounting for 17.1% of the total usages of the item, and "sended" occurred in 11 cases. The above results suggest that one important source of Taiwanese college EFL adult learners' problem with English T-A expressions was their unfamiliarity with the forms of the past tense or the past participles of the verbs. The incorrect forms show that the learners were overgeneralizing the morphological change of the regular verbs for the past tense form, which is consistent with the developmental tendency identified in previous studies on the acquisition of L2 English tense.

Table 2: The use of the forms of some verbs in the cloze

Target expression	(5) hit	(7) was shaking /was shaken/ had been shaken	(11) occurred/ had occurred	(14) were trapped/had been trapped	(17) sent
Number and percent of correct usage	51 39.5%	<i>was shaking</i> 6 4.7% <i>was shaken</i> 2 1.6	<i>occurred</i> 9 7.0% <i>had occurred</i> 1 0.8%	<i>were trapped</i> 34 26.4% <i>had been trapped</i> 4 3.1%	67 51.9%
Number and percent of the incorrect replacement	<i>hitted</i> , 22 15.5%	<i>was shaken</i> , 24 18.6% <i>had been shaken</i> , 1 0.8%	<i>occured</i> 62 48.1% <i>had ocured</i> 5 3.9% <i>was occured</i> 11 8.5% <i>was occurred</i> 1 0.8%	<i>were traped</i> 13 10.1% <i>had been traped</i> 1 0.8%	<i>sended</i> 7 5.4%
Number and percent of some uses of incorrect morpheme	<i>hitted</i> 26 20.2% <i>hited</i> 2 1.6%	<i>shaked</i> 79 61.2% <i>shook</i> 8 6.2%	<i>occured</i> 84 65.1%	<i>traped</i> 26 20.2%	<i>sended</i> 11 8.5%

The Problems with the English Aspect – A Cross-linguistic influence

As Table 1 shows, aspect poses more difficulty for the Chinese learners than the tense. One apparent reason should be that Mandarin and English have rather different ways for expressing aspect. It seems safe to claim that the Chinese learners were inefficient in using English aspect because Mandarin lacks the morphological systems of aspect like the ones for English.

The closer look into some items of the cloze test reveals that the Chinese learners

were rather ineffectual in using English aspects. As Table 3 shows, they tended to underuse or misuse either progressive or perfect aspect.

Table 3: Use of progressive and perfect aspect

Target expression	(4) was sleeping	(7) was shaking was shaken had been shaken	(12) was found had been found	(13) collapsed had collapsed	(17) have been working
Number and percent of correct usages	<i>was sleeping</i> 47 36.4%	<i>was shaking</i> 6 4.7% <i>was shaken</i> 2 1.6% <i>had been shaken</i> 0	<i>was found</i> 68 52.7% <i>had been found</i> 4 3.1%	<i>collapsed</i> 56 43.3% <i>had collapsed</i> 10 7.8%	<i>have been working</i> 19 14.7%
Number and percent of some incorrect usages	<i>slept</i> 47 36.4% <i>was slept</i> 8 6.2% <i>sleeping</i> 6 4.7%	<i>shaked</i> 46 35.7% <i>shook</i> 7 5.4% <i>shaking</i> 15 11.6% <i>was shaked</i> 24 18.6%	<i>was find</i> 9 7.9% <i>has been found</i> 4 2.1% <i>was finding</i> 5 3.9%	<i>was collapsed</i> 14 10.9% <i>were collapsed</i> 15 11.6%	<i>worked</i> 24 18.6% <i>work</i> 17 13.2% <i>working</i> 13 10.1% <i>have worked</i> 11 8.5%

As table 3 shows, the learners tended to confuse the past progressive with the simple past. With blank 4, half of the learners used the simple past tense “slept,” with one case using “sleped,” and one case using “slep.” That is, around 38% of the learners used the simple past tense, more than the target past progressive “was sleeping” (47 cases, 36.4%). The same tendency could be observed in blank 7. Fifty-three learners (41.1%) used the erroneous simple past tense “shaked” (46, 35.7%) or “shook” (7, 5.4%) instead of the correct expression “was shaking,” which comprise only 6 instances, accounting for merely 4.7% of the total usages. The learners also had difficulty making a distinction between the present progressive and the simple past, which can be shown with blank 17.

There are only 19 (14.7%) cases of correct usage “have been working.” However, there are 24 learners (18.6%) who used the simple past tense. Among the inappropriate usages, 11 learners (8.5%) used the present perfect tense. The above findings indicate that the past progressive aspect caused much trouble in the Chinese learners and it is likely to be confused with the simple past tense or present perfect tense.

The findings also show that the Chinese learners tended to overpassivize certain verbs. The two obvious cases are “occur” in blank 11 and “collapse” in blank 13. Among the former, thirteen learners used either “was occurred” (11 cases) or “was occurred” (1 case) (please see Table 1). Among the latter, there are 38 cases of passivization (29.5%), with 14 cases of “was collapsed” and 15 cases of “were collapsed.” The finding is consistent with the previous studies suggesting that Chinese learners tend to passivize ergatives (see Yip, 1995).

Chinese Learners’ Use of Discourse and Pragmatic Functions of English T-A forms

It was observed that Chinese learners of English applied English T-A forms for discourse and pragmatic functions rarely or inefficiently in written compositions (Yu, 1997). However, the result of the cloze shows that a majority of the learners were aware of the change of the tense between the verbs and were able to shift the tense forms when there were differences in the reference of temporality of these T-A forms. The learners’ uses of the tense of the verb “be” in blank 1, “gather” in blank 2, “can’t” in blank 3, and “be” in blank 19 are shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Shift of Tense Forms in the Cloze

Target expressions	(1) is, has been	(2) gather	(3) couldn’t, could not	(20) was
Number and percent of correct usages	<i>is</i> 108 83.7%	<i>gather</i> 74 57.4%	<i>couldn’t</i> 102 79.1%	<i>was</i> 64 49.6%
	<i>has been</i> 4 3.1%		<i>could not</i> 8 6.2%	
Number and percent of some incorrect usages	<i>was</i> 2 1.6%	<i>gathers</i> 15 11.6%	<i>couldn’t</i> 3 2.3%	<i>is</i> 20 15.5%
	<i>been</i> 5 3.9%	<i>gathered</i> 17 13.2%	<i>can’t</i> 9 7.0%	<i>has been</i> 10 7.8%
		<i>gathering</i> 11 8.5%		<i>had been</i> 8 6.2%

As shown in Table 4, overall in 73% of the instances, the right tense was assigned to the above verbs that show the change in the time sequences within the discourse. The findings from the composition analysis also show that when writing compositions, the learners were able to make more correct shifts of tense forms than incorrect ones. As shown in Table 5, on average 59.4% of the shifts identified in the learners' compositions are correct, while only 40.6% of the shifts are inappropriate. Also, the learners with higher proficiency tended to make fewer tense shifts and more correct shifts than the learners with lower proficiency.

Table 5: Tense shifts in the compositions

Group	words	sentences	shifts	Correct shifts	Incorrect shifts
Low	6203	602	215	121(56.3%)	94(43.7%)
Mid	7968	662	270	154 (58.1%)	116(42.9%)
High	10173	754	188	125 (66.5%)	63(33.5%)
Sum	24344	2018	673	400 (59.4%)	273(40.6%)

The learners, however, demonstrated less ability in using the right T-A forms to express the discourse function of grounding. Their performances over blank 4 “was sleeping”(see Table 3) and blank 5 “hit” (see Table 2) in the cloze test indicate that many learners were unable to use the right T-A forms of the two verbs, suggesting that they had difficulty in realizing the perfective and imperfective aspect of the verbs to indicate the foreground and the background of the narrative events.

The similar result is found in the compositions. Among the total of 24344 words and 2018 sentences the learners produced, only 37 instances attempted at incorporating the function of grounding. And only 13 of them used perfective and imperfective aspects of the verbs to show the function properly. Some examples of incorrect and correct usages are listed below:

- (1) *When we looking these pictures, all of us crying.
- (2) *And others had chatted when they did their painting.
- (3) When I was talking with my older brother, I heard some voice loudly near to me.
- (4) When I was eating my lunch, he asked me whether I like to get a Car License or a Motorcycle License.

Processing Load as One Major Source of Difficulty

The biggest revelation of the composition analysis is that the processing load of the learners is one important reason for their mistakes in the uses of the tense in discourse. Numerous instances (88 instances) show that in a longer sentence or discourse, especially with a compound or a complex sentence, the learners tended to use the wrong form of the T-A expression for the verbs in the subordinate clauses or subsequent part of the discourse. Obviously, longer or more complicated sentences are taxing the learners' extra processing load for completing the sentences. And even if the learners had developed the right concept of the tense of a verb, s/he might fall short of attention for the right forms in the subsequent verbs in the longer stretch of sentences or discourse.

Some examples are presented below.

- (5) *I was so excited when I hear the news.
- (6) *About 5 minutes passed, the fire engines came, and they poured out the fire and save us out.
- (7) *Originally we got along very well. I was in love with him and we have the same common consensus.
- (8) *When I thought about my mother's words and came back to the fruit store, I can't find my mother.

CONCLUSION

As the results of this investigation of the Chinese learners' English temporal system shows, the adult Chinese learners' difficulty with English tense and aspect stemmed mainly from their insufficient knowledge of English aspect and their unfamiliarity with the forms of T-A components. Most of the learners have developed a certain degree of concept of temporality in English, including shifting the tense forms when the sequences of time varied in the discourse. The Chinese learners' knowledge of English tense might partly come from their development of temporal concept via L1 Mandarin. On the other hand, English aspect was shown to be a more serious problem for the Chinese learners. The conclusions of the previous studies about the L2 T-A forms were born out in this study. The learners tended to confuse the past progressive with the simple past tense, and they had difficulty with the present and past perfect as well. They were also shown to overpassivize the ergative verbs. When it comes to the pragmatic function of aspect such as the uses of the simple past tense and the past progressive to indicate the foreground and background of the narrative, they rarely realized this function in their compositions, and if they did, they did it inappropriately. Their performance of this aspect in the cloze test was equally unsatisfactory.