

Assessing the role of lexical aspect in the acquisition of French Passé Composé and Imparfait: The case of Chinese-speaking learners of French

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The influence of lexical aspect in the acquisition of verb tenses has been widely studied. According to the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen & Shirai 1994), learners are strongly influenced by lexical aspectual classes of predicates: perfective morphology is initially associated with telic predicates (achievements and accomplishments), in contrast to imperfective morphology related to atelic predicates (states and activities). Over the past three decades, the Aspect Hypothesis has generated numerous studies addressing the role of lexical aspect in the acquisition of tenses. However, less attention has been paid to tensed L2 learners with a tenseless L1 background.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the acquisition of French Passé Composé and Imparfait in Chinese learners, focusing on the following two research questions: Does the lexical aspect of predicates affect Chinese learners' use of Imparfait and Passé Composé? Does the influence of lexical aspect decrease as the proficiency in L2 improves?

We carried out an experimental study, in which 46 French-major Chinese students participated, including 13 sophomores (Level 1), 17 juniors (Level 2), and 16 seniors (Level 3). Following Izquierdo (2009), we divided the use of verb tenses into prototypical (i.e., Passé Composé with telic predicates or Imparfait with atelic predicates) and non-prototypical (i.e., Passé Composé with atelic predicates or Imparfait with telic predicates) contexts. Participants were asked to accomplish a task consisting of 16 questions containing 8 prototypical and 8 non-prototypical contexts.

Our quantitative analysis shows that there are more errors in non-prototypical contexts (45.4%) than in prototypical contexts (4.3%). In prototypical contexts, Chinese learners show a better grasp, which manifests in 94.6% of states, 90.2% of activities, 97.8% of accomplishments, and 100% of achievements. In non-prototypical contexts, the performance of learners is less satisfactory: 80.4% of accomplishments, 67.4% of activities, 37% of states, and 33.7% of achievements. In both contexts, chi-square tests performed for each aspectual class do not show significant differences across three proficiency levels.

To conclude, the results show that lexical aspect influences the use of French past tenses in Chinese learners: in prototypical contexts, states and activities were predominantly associated with Imparfait, while accomplishments and achievements were predominantly associated with Passé Composé; in non-prototypical contexts, the rates of errors increased dramatically. Surprisingly, contrary to previous studies investigating the acquisition of English past tenses in Chinese learners (Zeng et al. 2021), in both prototypical and non-prototypical contexts, the L2 proficiency level does not have a statistically significant effect on the use of French past tenses in Chinese adult learners.

References

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