A Cross-linguistic Investigation on the Acquisition of Spanish Aspect

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the cross-linguistic effects on the acquisition of the semantic interpretation of the Preterit and Imperfect marking in Spanish as a second language (L2). The influence of language learners’ native language on the acquisition of L2 tense-aspect morphology has been reported by many scholars (e.g., Duff and Li, 2002; Shue, 1997). However, their studies are mainly concerned with transfer of form (i.e., morphology), not meaning (i.e., interpretation). Recently, linguists like Slabakova (2000, 2001, 2002, 2005) and Gabriele (2005) started to explore the effects of language transfer on the acquisition of the semantic interpretation of the aspectual marking in an L2. Slabakova (2000, 2001, 2002) conducted several studies with Bulgarian-speaking ESL learners with different proficiency levels. The results show that the learners with low proficiency did not recognize the sentences with telic events in English. Since the telicity marking is obligatory in Bulgarian, but it is optional in English, Slabakova’s (2000, 2001, 2002) findings suggest L1 influence on the acquisition of the L2 aspect. Furthermore, Slabakova (2001, 2002) reported that the learners at advanced level were sensitive to the contrast between the telic and atelic events in the L2 English, which indicates that it is possible for learners to successfully acquire the aspectual interpretation in an L2. In addition to Slabakova’s (2000, 2001, 2002) studies, similar results were also reported in Gabriele’s (2005) bi-directional research project with ESL and Japanese L2 learners and Slabakova’s (2005) study with English-speaking Russian L2 learners.

Although the findings of these studies bring new insights to the investigation on the acquisition of the aspectual marking in an L2, how language learner’s L1 affects the acquisition of the L2 aspect still needs to be further explored. Slabakova’s (2000, 2001, 2002, 2005) and Gabriele’s (2005) research only focuses on the acquisition of the aspectual marking on accomplishments and achievements, states and activity verbs were not included. Moreover, these researchers only recruited L2 learners with the same L1 background. How learners with different L1s acquire the aspectual contrast in the L2 was not investigated, and this is exactly what the present study does. In order to further investigate the L1 influence on the acquisition of L2 aspect, the present study examines how Chinese and English speaking Spanish L2 learners’ native language affects their acquisition of the semantic contrast between the Preterit and Imperfect marking in Spanish. I propose the following research question: Is there language transfer in the acquisition of the semantic interpretation of the Preterit and Imperfect marking in L2 Spanish? To be specific, do Chinese-speaking and English-speaking learners perform differently in recognizing the aspectual contrast between the Preterit and Imperfect marking in L2 Spanish?

Before turning to the details of this study, let us first look at the aspect systems in the languages involved: Spanish, English, and Chinese. The present study investigates the acquisition of the Preterit and Imperfect in Spanish; thus, I will only discuss the aspectual marking in past tense in these three languages.

2. Aspectual Marking in Spanish, English, and Chinese

2.1 Aspectual Marking in Spanish

The distinction between the perfective and imperfective aspect in past tense is marked by overt tense morphology in Spanish: the Preterit (e.g. estudió [studied]) and the Imperfect (e.g. estudiaba [used to study/ was studying]). In general, the Preterit marking in Spanish expresses an event as an unanalysable
action. The Imperfect expresses an event as an ongoing activity or habitual action in the past.

With respect to the interaction between grammatical and lexical aspect, both telic and atelic events are compatible with both the Preterit and Imperfect in Spanish, depending on the speaker’s point of view on the event and the context. Some state verbs in Spanish change their inherent lexical aspect value with different aspectual markings, such as “saber (to know)” and “querer (to want).” The Preterit marking on these verbs switches their inherent lexical aspect from states to achievements. This is illustrated in (1a&b).

1. a. Ella sabía el secreto.
   she know-Imperf.-3SG the secret
   “She knew the secret.”

   b. Ella supo el secreto.
   she find out-Pret.-3SG the secret.
   “She found out the secret.”

As shown in (1a), the state verb “saber (to know)” with the Imperfect marking denotes the state of knowing something. When the same verb is marked with Preterit, it becomes an achievement (i.e., to find out), like the sentence in (1b).

There are some other state verbs that do not change their inherent aspect value for different aspectual markings, such as “sentirse (to feel)” and “estar (to be).” The Imperfect marking on these verbs signals a stable situation, but the Preterit marking indicates a momentary state or a state with a definite endpoint, as shown in (2a&b).

2. a. Linda estaba triste y siempre se sentía triste.
   Linda be-Imperf.-3SG sad and (she) always Pron. feel-Imperf.-3SG sad
   “Linda was sad and Linda always felt sad.”

   b.(*)) Linda estuvo triste y siempre se sentía triste.
   Linda be-Pret.-3SG sad and (she) always Pron. feel-Imperf.-3SG sad
   “Linda became sad and Linda always felt sad.”

In (2a), the Imperfect marking indicates that Linda’s being sad was a state in the past; therefore, it is possible to combine the phrase “Linda estaba triste (Linda was sad)” with sentences that express a durable or stable situation, such as “siempre se sentía triste. ([she] always felt sad)”. On the other hand, the Preterit marking in (2b) expresses the state of being sad as a momentary feeling. Hence, it is not possible to combine the phrase “Linda estuvo triste (Linda became sad)” with sentences that entail permanent or stable interpretation.

As for the aspectual marking on accomplishments and achievements, the Imperfect marking emphasizes the continuous phase of the event, and it presents an event in progress¹. As presented in (3a) and (4a), since the focus is on the continuation of the action, it is possible that the goal was not achieved in the end. By contrast, Preterit denotes completion of the action, like (3b) and (4b). In these two examples, the Preterit marking indicates that the action is completed; thus, it is impossible to combine the event with sentences like “pero no terminaron la construcción” (but they did not finish the construction).

3. a. Ellos construían una casa, pero no terminaron la construcción.
   they build-Imperf.-3PL a house, but no finish-Pret.-3PL the construction
   “They were building a house, but they didn’t finish the construction.”

¹Achievements marked with the Imperfect markers may sound odd to some native speakers of Spanish. Since achievements have an inherent endpoint, they are incompatible with the Imperfect marking, unless the context supports an imperfective interpretation of the action.
b. (*) Ellos construyeron una casa, pero no terminaron la construcción.
   They built a house, but they didn’t finish the construction.

(4) a. Ellos llegaban a la clase cuando un terremoto se los impidió.
   They were arriving at the class when an earthquake stopped them.

b. (*) Ellos llegaron a la clase cuando un terremoto se los impidió.
   They arrived at the class when an earthquake stopped them.

To summarize, both atelic and telic verb predicates are compatible with the Preterit and Imperfect marking in Spanish, but the interpretation varies. In the next section, I will discuss the semantic interpretation of the aspectual marking in English.

2.2 Aspectual Marking in English

In English, the perfective aspect in the past tense is presented by the simple past inflection “-ed,” and the imperfective aspect is presented by the progressive marker “-ing.” With regard to the mapping between grammatical and lexical aspect, it is generally known that English state verbs are not compatible with progressive marking, as shown in (5).

(5) (*) John was knowing Mr. Peterson.

(6) a. John was being stupid.
   b. John was stupid.

However, native speakers of English do mark some state verbs with the progressive marker “-ing,” this is illustrated in (6a&b). The progressive marking on the verb “to be” in (6a) denotes a temporary state. It does not refer to John’s intelligence, and it only indicates John’s behavior at a certain point in the past. On the other hand, the perfective aspectual marking in (6b) presents the action of being stupid as part of John’s personality. It refers to John’s intelligence level, which is a stable state.

With respect to the aspectual marking on accomplishments and achievements, the imperfective aspectual marking focuses on the successive phase of the event. By contrast, the perfective aspectual marking expresses the event as a completed action. The examples are presented in (7a&b) and (8a&b).

(7) a. Mary was reading a book.
   b. Mary read a book.

(8) a. The spies were arriving at the gate.
   b. The spies arrived at the gate.

“Reading a book” and “arriving at the gate” are expressed as progressive events in (7a) and (8a). They are the stages before the agent completely accomplished the goal. On the other hand, the perfective aspect marking in (7b) and (8b) indicates that the agent has completed the action. In

Activities were excluded in this study because the semantic contrast on activities was not clear in either Spanish or English. See Chin (2006) for detailed discussion.
summary, the verb predicates are compatible with both the perfective and imperfective aspectual marking in English, but the interpretations are different. Let us now turn to the aspectual marking in Chinese.

2.3 Aspectual Marking in Chinese

Unlike Spanish and English, which mark aspect by overt tense morphology, Chinese marks aspect by different aspectual markers. There are four aspectual markers in Chinese: the perfective marker “le,” the experience marker “guo,” the progressive marker “zai,” and the durative marker “zhe.” In general, the perfective marker “le” signals the initiation or completion of an event. The experience marker “guo” indicates that an event has been experienced in the past, and the results of the event no longer exist at the time of speech. The progressive marker “zai” is placed preverbally, and it focuses on the progressive phase of an event. Finally, the durative marker “zhe” emphasizes the duration of an event, and it appears postverbally. Since the experience aspectual marker is beyond the scope of the present study, I will only focus on the perfective marker “le” and the two imperfective markers (i.e., the progressive “zai” and the durative “zhe”) in the following discussion.

With respect to the interaction between lexical and grammatical aspect in Chinese, the different aspectual markings on state verbs are illustrated in (9 a-c).

(9) a. State with perfective marker “le”
Xiaoming you-le yi-ge xiangfa.
“Xiaoming got an idea.”

b. State with progressive marker “zai”
*Xiaoming zai-you yi-ge xiangfa.
“Xiaoming is having an idea.”

c. State with durative marker “zhe”
Xiaoming you-zhe yi-ge xiangfa.
“Xiaoming has an idea.”

The perfective marker “le” in (9a) indicates the initiation of the state “having an idea.” The progressive marker “zai” is not compatible with states, as shown in (9b). Finally, the durative marker “zhe” in (9c) signals that having an idea is a stable state, it lasts up until the time of speech.

Turning now to accomplishments, these verb predicates are compatible with all the aspectual markers except for the durative marker “zhe,” as presented in (10a-c).

(10) a. Accomplishment with perfective marker “le”
wo gai-le yi-dong fangzi.
“I was engaged in building a house.”

b. Accomplishment with progressive marker “zai”
wo zai-gai yi-dong fangzi.
“I am building a house.”

c. (*) Accomplishment with durative marker “zhe”
(*) wo gai-zhe yi-dong fangzi.
“I am building a house.”

The perfective marker “le” in (10a) signals that the action of building a house has terminated, but whether the construction has been completed or not is unknown⁴. The progressive marker “zai” expresses the successive phase of an accomplishment, as shown in (10b). In other words, it emphasizes that “to build a house” is an action in progress. As for the example in (10c), the durative marker “zhe” is not compatible with accomplishments, thus, this sentence is ungrammatical. With respect to achievements, they are not compatible with the progressive and the durative markers, as presented in (11a-c).

(11) a. Achievement with perfective marker “le”
   wo diedao-le.
   I fall-Perf.
   “I fell.”

b. (*) Achievement with progressive marker “zai”
   (*) wo zai-diedao.
   I Prog.-fall
   “I am falling.”

c. (*) Achievement with durative marker “zhe”
   (*) wo diedao-zhe.
   I fall-Durative
   “I am falling.”

The perfective marker “le” in (11a) expresses the completion of falling. On the other hand, the sentences in (11b&c) are ungrammatical, because accomplishments cannot be marked with the imperfective aspect in Chinese.

2.4 Differences and Similarities in Aspectual Marking between Spanish, English, and Chinese

In general, the aspectual marking in Chinese is quite different from Spanish and English. In Spanish and English, the distinction between the perfective and imperfective aspect in past tense is marked by tense morphology (i.e. the Preterit and Imperfect in Spanish, and the simple past and past progressive in English). By contrast, Chinese does not have tense morphology; hence, aspect is marked by the aspectual markers.

With regard to the interaction between lexical and grammatical aspect, Spanish and English are flexible with the association between lexical and grammatical aspect. Both the perfective and imperfective aspectual markings are compatible with all lexical aspect categories in Spanish and English. However, the aspectual marking in Chinese is restricted by verb telicity. The progressive marker “zai” is only compatible with eventive verb predicates that entail duration (e.g., accomplishments), and the durative marker “zhe” can only be combined with atelic events (e.g., states).

As for the semantic interpretation of the aspectual marking, although the perfective aspectual marking on states signals a lexical category shift in Spanish and Chinese, it expresses a change of state in Spanish, but it denotes the initiation of a state in Chinese. By contrast, the imperfective aspectual marking on states in Spanish and Chinese denotes stable states. On the other hand, stable states are expressed by the perfective aspectual marking in English, and the imperfective aspectual marking on states expresses a temporary behavior.

Despite their differences in state verbs, Spanish and English are similar in the semantic interpretation of the aspectual marking on accomplishments and achievements. The perfective aspectual marking on

⁴The completion of an accomplishment is expressed by resultative adverbials such as “hao (well),” “wan (finish)” in Chinese. The verb-adverb combination (i.e., “gai-hao” (build-well)) is referred as the Resultative Verb Construction (RVC) (Smith, 1991; Tai, 1984; Vendler, 1957).
both accomplishments and achievements in Spanish and English expresses the completion of an event. The imperfective aspectual marking on these verb predicates presents the successive stages of an event. By contrast, the interpretation in Chinese is different. The perfective aspectual marking on accomplishments in Chinese only expresses the termination of an action, whether the event is completed or not is not indicated. As for the imperfective aspectual marking, it expresses the ongoing phase of an accomplishment event in Chinese, which is similar to Spanish and English. With regard to achievements, although the perfective aspect marking on achievements also denotes completion of an event, these verb predicates are not compatible with the imperfective aspect in Chinese.

In sum, Spanish and English are similar in the respect of aspectual marking in past tense. On the other hand, Chinese has a more detailed aspectual marking system, and it has more restrictive rules for the mapping between lexical and grammatical aspect. Regarding the semantic interpretation of different aspectual markings, all these three languages differ in the interpretation for states, while the interpretations for accomplishments and achievements are alike in Spanish and English.

3. The Study

In the following sections, I will first present the methods of the present study. Then, I will discuss the results along with the analysis of the group and individual data. Let us first look at the methods.

3.1 Participants

There were three groups of participants: the Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2), the English (L1)-Spanish (L2), and the Spanish native speaker groups. The English (L1)-Spanish (L2) group consisted of 22 participants, whose average age was 18.72 (ranging between 18 and 19). They were all native speakers of English recruited from intermediate-level Spanish classes at a U.S. university.

The 14 participants in the Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2) group were all Chinese native speakers acquiring Spanish as an L2 recruited from intermediate-level Spanish classes at two universities in Taiwan, with an average age of 18.28 (from 17 to 21). In addition to Spanish, all participants had acquired English as another L2, which is a requirement for all students in Taiwan. Therefore, Spanish was actually their third language (L3).

Eleven Spanish native speakers from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries participated in the native speaker group, and their average age was 29.45 (from 23 to 38).

3.2 Materials

The materials included a background questionnaire, a proficiency test, a morphology test, and an acceptability test in Spanish. The background questionnaire asked the participants’ Spanish learning experience. In addition, a multiple-choice cloze test served as the Spanish proficiency test. The test consisted of a one-page text with 36 fill-in-the-blanks. There were three options for each blank. The participants were asked to mark one of the options on a separate answer sheet. A sample question is presented in (12).

(12) El sistema de telefonía celular se _(_I_)_ en la división de una determinada _ (II)_ geográfica en áreas denominadas “celdas” o “_(III)_”
   I. a. base b. basaba c. base
   II. a. zona b. dimensión c. cueva
   III. a. celestials b. células c. cerradas

The Spanish morphology test consisted of a text that included 30 verbs. Each verb was underlined and presented in both Preterit and Imperfect marking. The verbs were balanced between stative and eventive verbs. The participants were asked to circle the correct form for each verb based on the context. The sentence in (13) shows a sample test item.

(13) No (a) hubo / había ninguna nube en el cielo, (b) hizo / hacía mucho calor.

The rationale of the morphology test is to test the participants’ knowledge of the Preterit and Imperfect
morphology, and to see if there was any difference between the L2 groups’ knowledge of the aspect marking in Spanish.

The main test of this study was the Spanish acceptability test, which was created following the format developed by Montrul and Slabakova (2002, 2003). The purpose of the acceptability test was to examine whether the participants were sensitive to the contrast between the Preterit and Imperfect marking in Spanish. Each question consisted of a sequence of two sentences. The first sentence described an event, and the verb predicate was marked with either Preterit or Imperfect. The second sentence described a situation that was acceptable for the Imperfect marking, but unacceptable for the Preterit marking. The participants were asked to rate the acceptability level of each sequence on a 5-point scale (i.e., 5 being acceptable and 1 being unacceptable). The examples are presented in (14a&b).

(14) a. Pedro pintaba dos cuadros. Pedro no terminó el segundo cuadro.
   Pedro paint-Imperf.-3SG two paintings Pedro Neg. finish-Pret.-3SG the second painting
   Pedro was painting two paintings. Pedro did not finish the second painting.

   1           2         3         4           5
   Unacceptable                                    Acceptable

b. Las niñas pintaron dos cuadros. Las niñas no terminaron el segundo cuadro.
   the girls paint-Pret.-3PL two paintings the girls Neg. finish-Pret.-3PL the second painting
   The girls painted two paintings. The girls did not finish the second painting.

   1           2          3           4           5
   Unacceptable                                     Acceptable

Since accomplishments with the Imperfect marking in Spanish indicate that the action is still in progress; (14a) is acceptable, and the expected answer is 5. By contrast, (14b) is not acceptable based on the context, so the expected answer is 1. There were acceptable and unacceptable sentence sequences for all three experimental conditions (i.e., states, accomplishments, and achievements), five items for each sentence type. In addition, there were 10 distracters. Five of them were acceptable sentences, and the other 5 were unacceptable. This resulted in 40 items in total. All test items were randomized for the test. A complete list of the test items is presented in Appendix A.

3.3 Predictions

Since the present study investigates how English and Chinese-speaking learners’ L1 influences their acquisition of the semantic contrast between the Preterit and Imperfect in Spanish, we propose the following predictions:

1. If there is no L1 influence, both L2 learner groups will respond in the similar pattern on the acceptability test. To be specific, Andersen (1986, 1989) claims that L2 learners will associate events with different aspects based on their telicity regardless of their L1, so, both the English L1 and the Chinese L1 groups will accept the sentences that mark states with Imperfect, and accomplishments and achievements with Preterit.

2. If there is L1 transfer, as reported by Slabakova’s (2000, 2001, 2005) and Gabriele’s (2005) studies, the two learner groups will respond differently. Since the semantic interpretations for states are different between Spanish and their native language, both L2 groups will not detect the semantic contrast on state verbs. On the other hand, The English L1 group will detect the contrast between Preterit and Imperfect on accomplishments and achievements, while the Chinese L1 group will not. This is because the semantic interpretations for these two verb categories are similar in Spanish and English, but they are different in Chinese.

After proposing the predictions, let us now look at the participants’ responses on the tests.
3.4 Results

Spanish Proficiency Test

On the Spanish proficiency test, the English L1 group’s average score was 57.83%, the Chinese L1’s was 52.78%, and the Spanish native speakers scored 94.7%. A one-way ANOVA analysis demonstrates that the difference between these three groups’ mean scores was significant (F (2, 44) = 82.943, p < .0001). A Post-Hoc Tuckey HSD test shows that the native speakers’ mean score was significantly higher than the two learner groups’ (Spanish native vs. English (L1)-Spanish (L2): sig. = .0001, Spanish native vs. Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2): sig. = .0001), but the L2 learner groups did not differ from each other (English (L1)-Spanish (L2) vs. Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2): sig. = .226).

Spanish Morphology Test

Regarding the morphology test, the English L1 group scored 75.76%, and the Chinese L1 group scored 70.27%. In addition, the natives’ average was 96.97%. A one-way ANOVA analysis shows that the differences between the three groups’ mean scores were statistically significant (F (2, 44) =24.542, p < .0001). A Post-Hoc Tukey HSD test indicates that the difference was between the native speaker group and the two L2 learner groups (Spanish native vs. English (L1)-Spanish (L2): sig.= .0001, Spanish native vs. Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2): sig. = .0001), not between the two learner groups (English (L1)-Spanish (L2) vs. Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2): sig. = .537). The finding that the two learner groups did not differ from each other in the proficiency and the morphology tests is important, because it suggests that any differences found between these two groups in the acceptability test can be attributed to L1 influence, not to the proficiency level and the learners’ knowledge of the Preterit and Imperfect morphology.

Spanish Acceptability Test

Distracters

Distracters tell us whether or not the participants understand the task and the instructions and whether they can distinguish between logical and illogical sentences irrespective of aspect. The three groups’ responses are presented in Figure 1. A paired t-test analysis shows that all three groups recognized the contrast between the logical and the illogical distracters (Spanish Native: t (1, 10) = 27.86, English (L1)-Spanish (L2): t (1, 21) = 15.71, Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2): t (1, 13) = 6.2, p< .0001). This indicates that all participants were able to perform the task. Next, let us look at the group results of the three experimental conditions.

![Figure 1. Acceptance Rates for Distracters in the Spanish Native, English (L1)-Spanish (L2), and Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2) Groups](image)
3.4.1 Group Results

States

The participants’ responses in the sentence sequences with state verbs are presented in Figure 2. From Paired samples t-tests, we can see that only the natives were sensitive to the semantic contrast in the Preterit and Imperfect markings on state verbs \((t (1,10) = 17.31, p < .0001)\). The L2 learners did not recognize the contrast \((English (L1)-Spanish (L2): t (1, 21) = 1.6, p = .13; Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2): t (1, 13) = .07, p = .945)\). This finding supports our second prediction. That is, the L2 learners were not sensitive to the contrast on states, and this is because the aspectual interpretations for state verbs are different between the learners’ L1 and L2.

![Figure 2. Acceptance Rates for States in the Spanish Native, English (L1)-Spanish (L2), and Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2) Groups](image)

Accomplishments

Figure 3 presents the three groups’ responses to accomplishments. Paired samples t-test analysis indicates that the Spanish native speakers were sensitive to the semantic contrast on accomplishments \((t (1, 10) = 16.3, p < .0001)\). Like the natives, the English L1 group also perceived this contrast \((t (1, 21) = 2.82, p = .01)\); however, the Chinese L1 group did not \((t (1, 13) = 1.45, p = .172)\). Recall that the semantic interpretation for accomplishments is similar in Spanish and English, but it is different in Chinese. The two learner groups’ responses demonstrate L1 influence on the participants’ judgment of the semantic interpretation for the Preterit and Imperfect marking.

![Figure 3. Acceptance Rates for Accomplishments in the Spanish Native, English (L1)-Spanish (L2), and Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2) Group](image)
Achievements

Figure 4 shows the participants’ acceptance rates for the sentence sequences with achievements. A paired samples t-test analysis indicates that the native speakers detected the aspectual contrast on achievements (t (1, 10) = 18.75, p < .0001). On the other hand, both L2 groups rated the sentences with both the Imperfect and the Preterit markings below 3. Yet, the statistical results indicate that the English L1 group detected the contrast (t (1, 21) = 4.54, p < .0001), but the Chinese L1 group did not (t (1, 13) = .484, p = .636). This suggests that although the English L1 group was uncertain about the interpretation for the Imperfect marking on achievements, they still detected the contrast. The Chinese L1 group’s ratings for the sentences with both markings were very close, which indicates that these participants had difficulty distinguishing the difference between the Preterit and Imperfect marking on achievements. Since achievements are only compatible with perfective aspect in Chinese, these participants’ responses suggests L1 influence.

![Figure 4](image.png)

Figure 4. Acceptance Rates for Achievements in the Spanish Native, English (L1)-Spanish (L2), and Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2) Groups

In general, the participants in the English-speaking group recognized the contrast on accomplishments and achievements, but they did not detect the contrast on states. On the other hand, the Chinese-speaking learners were not sensitive to the aspectual contrast in all three experimental conditions. These findings demonstrate that there is L1 influence in the acquisition of the semantic interpretation for the aspect marking in L2 Spanish. In addition to the group results, we should also look at the individual data. This will reveal whether the individual responses correspond to the group results.

3.4.2 Individual Results

States

Table 1 shows the percentage of the participants who could see the semantic contrast in each group. There was only one native speaker who did not demonstrate statistically significant difference in his/her responses to the acceptable and unacceptable sentence sequences. This participant rated the sequences with both markings on the verb durar (to last) below 3 and rated above 4 for the sequences with faltar (to lack). The fact that this native speaker did not detect the aspectual contrast can be attributed to his/her unusual responses to these two verbs.
Table 1. Percentage of the Participants who Recognized the Semantic Contrast on States

As for the learners, none of the Chinese-speaking learners recognized the contrast, while two participants in the English L1 group demonstrated significant difference in their responses to these different aspectual markings. One of these two participants scored above the group average on the proficiency test (i.e. 66.67%), while the other did not (i.e. 52.78%). Furthermore, they scored 73.33% and 70% on the morphology test, which was below the group average (i.e. 75.76%). This suggests that these two participants were not more advanced than the others in the English L1 group. Since the proficiency difference did not contribute to this result, other factors might influence these two participants’ responses. We don’t know if these two participants had received any specific instruction regarding the semantic interpretation of the Preterit and Imperfect on state verbs; therefore, the factors that contribute to their responses are unclear.

In general, the low percentage of individuals who recognized the contrast in the L2 learner groups corresponds to the group findings. Both the English-speaking and Chinese-speaking learners had difficulty in detecting the semantic contrast between the Preterit and Imperfect markings on state verbs. Next, let us look at the participants’ individual responses.

Accomplishments

With respect to the results of accomplishments, Table 2 indicates that all native speakers detected the contrast. The percentage of the L2 learners who recognized the contrast is higher in the English L1 group than in the Chinese L1 group (i.e., 27.3% vs. 14.3%). This finding coincides with the group data. The English L1 group perceived the semantic contrast on accomplishments, but the Chinese L1 group did not. This could be attributed to the fact that there were more participants in the English-speaking group that recognized such contrast than in the Chinese-speaking group.

Table 2. Percentage of the Participants who Recognized the Semantic Contrast on Accomplishments.

As for the individuals who recognized the contrast in the L2 groups, 3 of the English L1 participants and one in the Chinese L1 group scored lower than the group average on the proficiency test and the morphology tests. This suggests that these participants’ sensitivity to the semantic contrast on accomplishments might not be related to their proficiency level and their knowledge of the aspect morphology in Spanish. Let us now see how the participants respond to the sentences with achievements.

Achievements

The analysis of individual responses in Table 3 shows that there was one native speaker who did not show statistically significant differences between the acceptance rates. This participant rated the items with both the Preterit and Imperfect markings on llegar (to arrive) and venir (to come) at 1, which contributed to such result. Only two participants in the English L1 group and one in the Chinese L1
group showed significant differences in their responses to the semantic contrast. Although these participants’ scores on the proficiency test were above their group average (ranging from 66.6% to 69%), only two of them also scored above the average on the morphology test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Contrast (%)</th>
<th>No Contrast (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Native</td>
<td>91 (10/11)</td>
<td>9 (1/11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English (L1)-Spanish (L2)</td>
<td>9.1 (2/22)</td>
<td>90.9 (20/22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (L1)-Spanish (L2)</td>
<td>7.1 (1/14)</td>
<td>92.9 (13/14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Percentage of the Participants who Recognized the Semantic Contrast on Achievements

In sum, the individual results for achievements do not completely correspond to the group data. The English-speaking learners were sensitive to the aspectual contrast on achievements as a group, but the number of participants who actually recognized the contrast was very small. In addition, the relationship between the learners’ proficiency and their ability of detecting the semantic contrast is not clear. Not all learners that recognized the contrast were more advanced than the rest of their groups.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In general, both the group and the individual results indicate that the English L1 group’s and the Chinese L1 group’s responses on the acceptability test were different. The English-speaking learners were more sensitive to the contrast than Chinese-speaking learners, because of the similarities between the English and Spanish aspect systems. This confirms the second prediction that there is L1 transfer in the acquisition of the semantic contrast between the Preterit and Imperfect marking in Spanish.

This finding coincides with the results of Gabriele’s (2005) and Slabakova’s (2000, 2001, 2002, 2005) studies. The English L1 learners were more sensitive to the contrast on accomplishments and achievements than the Chinese L1 group, because such contrast is initiated in their L1. In addition, the present study examined the participants’ responses for state verbs, which is a verb category that was not included in previous studies. The semantic interpretation for states differs in English, Chinese, and Spanish; thus, both L2 groups did not detect the semantic contrast on states in Spanish. This finding is important, because it further confirms Gabriele’s (2005) and Slabakova’s (2000, 2001, 2002, 2005) finding that differences between the L2 and the L1 cause difficulty in the acquisition of the aspectual contrast in the L2.

Moreover, the individual results reveal an interesting phenomena. The responses of the participants who detected the semantic contrast suggest that the L2 learners’ proficiency and their knowledge of the aspect morphology might not be related to their ability of recognizing the contrast between the Preterit and Imperfect. This contradicts the findings of previous studies. In Montrul and Slabakova’s (2002, 2003) studies with English-speaking Spanish L2 learners, they set 75% to be the cut-off point to determine whether a participant had acquired the Preterit and Imperfect morphology in the L2. They found that there were more participants who detected the aspectual contrast in the group that scored above 75% on the morphology test than in the group that scored below 75%.

The fact that the individual data of the present study differs from that of Montrul and Slabakova’s (2002, 2003) studies might be due to the low proficiency level of our participants. The participants in Montrul and Slabakova’s (2002, 2003) studies were learners from the high-intermediate level to near native, while the present study only recruited intermediate level learners. Moreover, the number of the participants who were sensitive to the contrast between the Preterit and Imperfect in the L2 Spanish was quite small. It is not clear whether the discrepancy between the participants’ knowledge of the aspect morphology and their ability of detecting the aspectual contrast was attributed by the unusual behavior of several participants or other factors such as frequency of exposure and the instructions that they received in the classroom.

5. Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of the present study is the fact that the Chinese L1 participants were L3 learners. Since these participants had previously acquired English as another L2, their knowledge of English might
affect their judgment in Spanish. Leung (1998, 2002, 2005, 2006) claims that L3 learners have two sources for language transfer: the L1 and the interlanguage grammar of their L2. Therefore, the Chinese L1 learners’ responses in Spanish might not only be affected by their L1 but also by the L2 English. Since the L3 issue is out of the scope of the present study, the Chinese L1 group’s knowledge of English was not examined. How these Chinese L1 participants’ knowledge of English affects their responses in Spanish needs to be further explored.

Another limitation is the assessment. There was only one task to assess the L2 learners’ knowledge of the semantic interpretation in the L2 aspectual system. Thus, the findings of the present study are limited to the judgment test. To thoroughly assess L2 learners’ knowledge of the semantic interpretation of different aspectual markings, a variety of tasks is essential.

Investigating the cross-linguistic effects on the acquisition of the semantic interpretation of the L2 aspectual marking is just the beginning. Future studies on topics such as language transfer in the acquisition of L3 aspect and the acquisition of other linguistic elements that affect the semantic interpretation (e.g., adverbs, telicity markings) and the influence of proficiency on language transfer still need to be investigated.

Appendix A
Test Items for the Spanish Acceptability Test

(i) States with Imperfect marking, state interpretation. (acceptable)

1. La fiesta era a la 1 de la tarde. Al final, la fiesta empezó a las 2 de la tarde.
2. Me faltaba el pan. Finalmente, compré el pan.
3. El drama duraba hasta las 2 de la tarde. Al final, el drama terminó a las 4.
4. Los niños tenían que terminar el proyecto. Finalmente, no lo terminaron.
5. La casa le costaba diez mil dólares a mi abuela. Finalmente, mi abuela no compró la casa.

(ii) States with Preterit marking, state interpretation. (unacceptable)

6. La boda de Sofía y Juan fue a las 3 de la tarde. Al final, la boda empezó a las 4.
7. A mi hermano le faltaron unas manzanas. Finalmente, mi hermano compró unas manzanas.
8. La ceremonia duró hasta las 11 de la mañana. Al final, la ceremonia terminó al mediodía.
9. Mis hermanos tuvieron que terminar el proyecto. Finalmente, no lo terminaron.
10. El libro me costó cien dólares. Al final, no compré el libro.

(iii) Accomplishments with Imperfect marking, imperfective interpretation. (acceptable)

11. Escribía una novela. No terminé la novela.
12. El cocinero cocinaba el plato. El cocinero no terminó de cocinar el plato.
13. Mis primos cantaban dos canciones en el concierto. Mis primos no terminaron la segunda canción.

(iv) Accomplishments with Preterit marking, imperfective interpretation. (unacceptable)

16. Escribí una carta. No terminé la carta.
17. Ana cocinó el plato. Ana no terminó de cocinar el plato.
18. Mis primas cantaron dos canciones en el concierto. Mis primas no terminaron la segunda canción.
19. Las niñas pintaron dos cuadros. Las niñas no terminaron el segundo cuadro.

(v) Achievements with Imperfect marking, imperfective interpretation. (acceptable)

22. Las hojas de los árboles caían al suelo. Las agarré en el aire.
24. Mi padre venía a Chicago. Finalmente, mi padre no vino.
25. Pablo alcanzaba la cima de la montaña. De repente, una avalancha se lo impidió y no alcanzó la cima de la montaña.

(vi) Achievements with Preterit marking, imperfective interpretation. (unacceptable)

27. Las hojas de los árboles cayeron al suelo. Las agarré en el aire.
29. Mis hermanos vinieron a L.A.. Finalmente, mis hermanos no vinieron.
30. Juan y María alcanzaron la cima de la montaña. De repente, una avalancha se los impidió y no alcanzaron la cima de la montaña.

(vii) Distracters (acceptable)

31. Susana jugaba al baloncesto todos los días. Susana era muy atlética.
32. Mi hermano compró esta novela el año pasado. Mi hermano me prestó esta novela.
33. Fuimos a la biblioteca ayer. Estuvimos en la biblioteca por 3 horas.
34. El año pasado mi primo y su esposa compraron una casa nueva en Arizona. Ahora mi primo y su esposa viven en Arizona.
35. La señora era una amiga de mi abuela. Mi abuela y la señora Se conocían por muchos años.

(viii) Distracters (unacceptable)

36. Mi padre me compró este diccionario. No tengo padre.
37. Juan nadaba todos los días. Juan no sabía nadar.
38. Fui a la biblioteca ayer. No fui a la biblioteca ayer.
40. El señor era un amigo de mi padre. Mi padre no conocía a este señor.

References


