# Chinese Speakers' Acquisition of Telicity in English

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## 1. Introduction

An important issue in SLA research concerns the relationship between the type of evidence available to the learners and the learning outcome. It is argued that whereas positive input is sufficient for first language acquisition, L2 learning might call for negative input that makes learners explicitly aware of the ungrammaticality/infelicity of certain L1-based options in the target language (White 1991). Such a learning situation is considered difficult because the negative evidence required to preempt illicit options is considered either not readily available or not effective to engage the restructuring of the language system (e.g., White, 1991; Schwartz, 1993; Schwartz & Gubala-Ryzak 1992). Yet empirical studies on this learnability issue do not always point to the same conclusions, with some studies confirming the difficulty of acquisition in situations requiring negative evidence (e.g., White 1991; Westergaard, 2003; Gabriele 2009, among others) and others showing success (e.g., Yuan, 2001; Montrul 2001; Trapman & Kager 2009, among others).

To further our understanding of this learnability issue, we investigated Chinese speakers' acquisition of telicity in English, a learning situation that requires negative evidence. As we discuss in more detail below, Accomplishment verb phrases in English allow only telic interpretations, such that the inherent endpoint of the event is understood to be attained (we call this the "Completion" reading). By contrast, Accomplishment VPs in Chinese, in addition to the telic interpretation, also permit an atelic interpretation, i.e., the event is understood to stop at an arbitrary point rather than its inherent endpoint (we will call this the "Termination" reading, following Smith, 1997). This cross-linguistic difference between English and Chinese means that these two languages are in a logical superset-subset relationship from the perspective of L1 Chinese speakers acquiring aspect-marking in L2 English, a learning situation that would require negative evidence to preempt an option that is licit in L1 but not in L2 (namely the Termination reading of Accomplishment VPs). On this basis, we predict that learners who are native speakers of Chinese will face difficulties acquiring the correct interpretation of telicity in English. We report the results of a sentence rating task on Chinese speakers at various levels of English proficiency. The results indeed show that the majority of participants failed to arrive at the correct L2 English telicity interpretation. We discuss the implications of our findings for theories of learnability and the potential relevance of the kind of linguistic information that is being acquired.

## 2. Background
### 2.1. Telicity

Telicity is a temporal feature relevant to lexical aspect (e.g., Smith 1997). Specifically, telicity refers to "the property of an event's having a distinct, definite and inherent endpoint in time" (Tenny, 1994, p. 4). Of the four types of verbs identified by Vendler (1967), Accomplishment and

Achievement situations are telic situations while Statives and Activities are atelic situations. The following two sentences illustrate the telic/atelic contrast:

(1)
a. Mary walked to the park in an hour/*for an hour.     (telic Accomplishment situation)
b. Mary walked in the park *in an hour/for an hour.     (atelic Activity situation)

"Walk to the park" in (1a) encodes an event that has an intrinsic endpoint (the person's arrival at the park) whereas the event expressed in "walk in the park" in (1b) does not have such an intrinsic endpoint. Hence, the former is a telic situation (Accomplishment) and the latter an atelic situation (Activity). A widely used test for telicity is the event's compatibility with durative (e.g., *for an hour*) or completive (e.g., *in an hour*) time adverbials. Telic events such as (1a) are compatible with completive (*in*) but not durative (*for*) adverbials, whereas the opposite is true for atelic events such as (1b) – they are compatible with durative (*for*) but not completive (*in*) adverbials.

## 2.2. The direct object and telicity

In the computation of telicity, the direct object plays an important role in some languages. This can be seen in ex. (2) from English:

(2)
a. Mary ate an apple.          (bounded entity      telic event)
b. Mary ate ice cream.         (unbounded entity    atelic event)
c. Mary ate apples.            (unbounded entity    atelic event)
(*adapted from Tenny, 1994, p. 24*)

In example (2a), with a count noun that encodes a specific quantity (i.e., bounded), the event of eating is completed when the apple is gone. However, with a mass noun such as "ice cream" in (2b), Mary might continue eating indefinitely since the amount of ice cream is indefinite. The same could be said for plural nouns, such as "apples" in (2c). In terms of telicity, the first sentence presents a telic situation and the remaining two, atelic ones. The contributing factor here is the boundedness feature of the direct object (Smith, 1997; Tenny, 1994; Smollett, 2005; Soh & Kuo, 2005; Slobakova, 2000, among others). It is also variously called *specified cardinality*, *spatial delimitedness,* or *quantization*. Basically, what matters is whether the entity in question has defined extent or quantity (Tenny, 1994). "An apple" in (2a) specifies the quantity of "apple", whereas "ice cream" (2b) and "apples" (2c) do not specify the quantity of the respective entities. The relationship between boundedness and the different types of NPs in English is summarized in Table 1 below. Note that definiteness in English is irrelevant for boundedness, as both definite and indefinite NPs are considered bounded.

**Table 1: Boundedness and noun phrases in English**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Bounded: | indefinite | *an apple* |
| | definite | *the apple* |
| | demonstrative | *this/that apple* |
| | numeral | *two apples* |
| Unbounded: | mass | *water* |
| | bare plural | *apples* |

However, in some Slavic languages (such as Russian, Polish, and Bulgarian), the direct object is irrelevant for the telicity calculation. Even in languages whose telicity calculation is sensitive to the direct object, differences in their nominal systems might ultimately lead to telicity interpretations that differ from those of English. For example, in English the definite NP "the apple" is considered to be [+bounded], giving rise to a telic interpretation for the verb phrase "eat an apple", but the closest

counterpart in Chinese demonstrative NP ("this/that apple") has been argued to be [±bounded] (e.g., Soh & Kuo, 2005), giving rise to both telic and atelic interpretations. These kinds of cross-linguistic differences in telicity marking may have implications for second language acquisition, which we turn to in the next section.

## 3. Telicity in Second Language Acquisition

Slabakova (2000) looked at Bulgarian and Spanish native speakers' acquisition of English telicity. Spanish is similar to English in the way that boundedness of the object affects telicity computation. In contrast, in Bulgarian, boundedness of the direct object does not affect telicity computation. Instead, this language signals telicity through the use of perfective preverbs. Slabakova predicted that, aided by L1-L2 similarity, Spanish speakers' interpretations of English test sentences would show sensitivity to the boundedness of direct object NPs, just like native English speakers. On the other hand, Bulgarian learners would, due to L1 influence, be biased towards interpreting all English test sentences as atelic, given that the preverbs which signal telicity in Bulgarian do not exist in English.

To test these predictions, Slabakova presented participants with two-clause sentences like the ones in Example 3 below. Participants were asked to "assess on a scale from -3 to +3 how well two clauses in complex sentences combine with each other" (Slabakova 2000, p. 754). The two extremes of the scale are defined as "a perfectly natural combination" (+3) and "a very unnatural combination" (-3) respectively (754).

(3)
a. *Habitual Context + Telic Situation*[1]
   Antonia worked in a bakery and made a cake.
b. *Habitual Context + Atelic Situation*
   Sharon worked in a bakery and made cakes.

In both conditions, the first clause establishes a habitual context ("Antonia worked in a bakery"). This clause is followed either by a phrase that in English has a telic interpretation ("made a cake") or a phrase that has an atelic interpretation (e.g. "made cakes"). The assumption is that if a comprehender interprets "made a cake" as telic, then this should result in a clash with the preceding habitual context and should result in lower ratings[2] than "made cakes" which is atelic and therefore does not clash with the preceding context. Hence, sentence (3a) was predicted to be worse than (3b) for native English speakers, and indeed, this is what Slabakova found.

The results of Slabakova (2000)'s study show clear difference between Spanish and Bulgarian learners. Spanish learners patterned like English native speakers and rated sentences like (3a) as more contradictory than sentences like (3b). In contrast, Bulgarian learners showed no sensitivity to the boundedness of English object NPs and rated examples like (3a) and (3b) to be equally good in terms of the naturalness of the combination. Slabakova concludes that differences in the learners' first languages caused these differences.

In related work, Kaku (2009) and Gabriele (2010) investigated telicity acquisition by L1 Japanese/L2 English learners and L1 English/L2 Japanese learners respectively. Japanese bare count nouns allow both telic and atelic readings. Gabriele (2010) found that L1 English/L2 Japanese participants had difficulty correctly acquiring L2 Japanese telicity, assigning exclusively telic readings to bare count nouns in Japanese. In Kaku (2009)'s study on L1 Japanese/L2 English learners, Beginning learners were found to have difficulties, incorrectly allowing atelic reading for sentences like "Lisa erased the star", while Intermediate and Advanced learners performed better.

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[1] Slabakova calls these conditions "Characteristic and telic" (ex.3a) and "Characteristic and atelic" (ex.3b).

[2] In a review of Slabakova's work, Lopes (2002) expressed doubt over the methodology of the telicity study, saying that it is not clear how rating a sentence like example (3a) tells us anything about telicity: "One may rate it low, not based on the telicity interpretation but based on real-world knowledge" (Lopes 2002, p. 184).

### 3.1. Aims of our experiment

Our study, on L1 Chinese speakers' interpretation of telicity in English, has two main goals. First, we aim to contribute to our understanding of how second-language learners use the nature of the object NP to guide their telicity interpretations. There is relatively little existing work in this area: To the best of our knowledge, the three studies discussed above form the bulk of the prior research. Thus, our study continues this line of research and hopes to increase our understanding on this issue by looking at Chinese speakers' acquisition of English telicity.

The second main aim of our study is to shed light on the issue of negative evidence in acquisition. It has been argued that if L1 instantiates a larger set of options than the L2 with respect to a certain property, the learner needs to "un-learn" the relevant L1 option in order to converge on the correct L2 grammar (e.g. Montrul 2001; Inagaki, 2001; Slabakova 2002). To "un-learn" an L1 option entails learning the fact that the L1 option is ungrammatical in the L2. Logically, it seems that accomplishing this requires negative evidence, such as error correction. However, many researchers have argued that negative evidence is lacking in the input that L2 learners receive or that even if it is present in some form, it is not effective (e.g., White, 1991, Schwartz, 1993; Schwartz & Gubala-Ryzak, 1992).

In our study, the L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) exist in a superset-subset relationship for the property under investigation, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Telicity interpretation of Chinese and English accomplishment VPs**
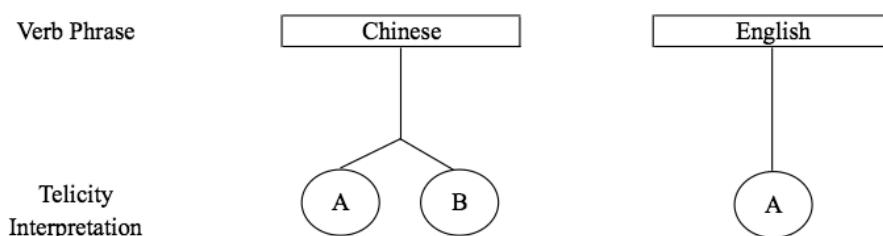


As shown schematically in Figure 1 and discussed in more detail in Section 4.1., in some situations Chinese allows for a larger set of interpretations (superset) than English (subset) does. This is predicted to cause problems for Chinese speakers learning English, because it means that they need to preempt interpretation B, which is allowed in L1 Chinese but not in L2 English. This is considered a difficult task because while the input that learners are exposed to indicates that interpretation A is allowed in English, it crucially does not provide indicate that interpretation B is not allowed in English. Simply because interpretation B is not instantiated in the input may not be sufficient grounds for the learner to conclude that it is an illegal option in English. In order to acquire the knowledge that interpretation B is not allowed in English, learners would need negative evidence. Because such evidence is argued to be either unavailable or not effective for reorganizing learners' grammar, a learning situation requiring negative evidence is predicted to pose difficulties for learners.

Interestingly, this prediction does not always receive support from empirical studies. White (1991) (on adverb placement in L2 English), Westergaard (2003) (on unlearning V-2 word order in L2 English) and Gabriele (2009) (on progressive morphology in L2 English and L2 Japanese), among others, did find that learners have difficulty preempting the L1 grammar – i.e., their findings fit with the idea that in a superset-subset situation, the absence of negative evidence causes difficulties. On the other hand, other researchers have found that learners were able to achieve success in a learning situation that would require negative evidence: e.g., Yuan (2001) on adverb placement in L2 Chinese; Montrul (2001) on argument structure in L2 Spanish; Trapman & Kager (2009) on phonotactic knowledge in L2 Dutch. These divergent results indicate that more work is needed to further our understanding of this important learnability issue.

# 4. Differences between English and Chinese in Telicity
## 4.1. Observations on English vs. Chinese

Chinese and English are similar in that boundedness of the object NP in both languages affects the interpretation of verb phrases as denoting telic or atelic events. However, different types of object NPs affect telicity differently in Chinese and in English, as shown in Table 2 and Examples (4-5).

**Table 2: Different telicity interpretations in English and Chinese**

|  | With Definite/Demonstrative NP Object (*the/this/that letter*) | With Numeral NP Object (e.g. *three letters*) |
|---|---|---|
| **English** | Telic | telic |
| **Chinese** | telic/atelic | telic |

(4) Chinese Examples

a. *Numeral NP*

| * John | xie | le | san | feng | xin, | keshi | mei | xie-wan. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| John | write | ASP | three | Classifier | letter | but | not | write-finish |

John wrote/was writing three letters, but didn't finish writing them.

b. *Demonstrative NP*[3]

| John | xie | le | zhei/na feng | xin, | keshi | mei | xie-wan. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| John | write | ASP | this/that Classifier | letter | but | not | write-finish |

John wrote/was writing this/that letter, but didn't finish writing it.

(5) English Examples

a. *Numeral NP*

  * John wrote three letters, but didn't finish writing them.

b. *Definite/Demonstrative NP*

  * John wrote the/this/that letter, but didn't finish writing it.

Accomplishment verbs with *numeral NP objects* (e.g. "write three letters") denote telic events in both Chinese and English, and under the perfective aspect the sentence would give rise to an interpretation in which the event reaches its natural endpoint (completion reading). This is why both Example (4a) and Example (5a) sound unnatural. The cause of unnaturalness is that while the first clause of the complex sentence indicates completion of the event (wrote three letters), the second clause of the complex sentence states that the event did not proceed to completion. The contradiction between the two clauses results in unnaturalness of the whole sentence.

However, accomplishment verbs with definite or demonstrative NP objects pattern differently. English VPs with definite NP objects (Example 5b) or demonstrative NP objects ("John wrote this/that letter") denote exclusively telic events and thus receive a completion reading under the perfective aspect. Thus, similar to Example (5a), (5b) also sounds unnatural due to the clash in telicity between the two clauses. However, in Chinese, VPs with demonstrative NPs can denote either telic or atelic events. Consequently, both completion and termination interpretations are possible with sentences such as Example (4b). The completion interpretation is one in which the event reaches its inherent endpoint. By contrast, a termination interpretation is one in which the event stops at an arbitrary point

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[3] Chinese has demonstrative determiners (*this/that*), but it does not have a dedicated definite article like English does. English has both the definite article and demonstrative determiners.

without reaching its inherent endpoint[4] (e.g., Smith, 1997). Thanks to this ambiguity, it is fine to follow the first clause with a second clause that describes the event as not having reached its inherent endpoint.

## 4.2. Explanation of telicity differences between English and Chinese

Some researchers explain the availability of a termination interpretation for demonstrative NPs in Chinese in terms of the aspectual marker *le* (Smith, 1997) or the differences in the Accomplishment situation type between Chinese and English (Tai, 1984). Due to space limitations, we are unable to discuss the details of these accounts. We simply note here that while both Smith (1997) and Tai (1984) can explain the existence of the termination interpretation for Chinese verb phrases with demonstrative NP objects, they do not address the absence of the termination interpretation for sentences that involve VPs with numeral object NPs. As the asymmetry between (4a) and (4b) indicates, an adequate explanation of the termination interpretation in Chinese needs to be sensitive to the nature of the direct object NPs. A third proposal, presented by Soh & Kuo (2005), does make a distinction between different NP types and is thus able to capture the differences between (4a) and (4b).

Soh & Kuo (2005) attribute the differences between Chinese and English to the differences in the boundedness feature on Chinese and English noun phrases. As explained in Section 2.2., "boundedness" is a property that is related to whether the entity has defined extent or quantity (Tenny, 1994). In English, Definite/Demonstrative NPs (e.g. "the/this/that letter") and Numeral NPs (e.g. "three letters") are considered [+bounded]. In Chinese however, Demonstrative NPs have the option of being either bounded or unbounded (i.e., [±bounded]), though Numeral NPs must be [+bounded], just like in English. Table 3 below summarizes the similarities and contrasts between the two languages in the value of the boundedness feature:

**Table 3: Different boundedness features in English and Chinese**

|  | Definite/Demonstrative NP (the/this/that letter) | Numeral NP (three letters) |
|---|---|---|
| **English** | +bounded | +bounded |
| **Chinese** | ±bounded | +bounded |

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[4] Smith (1997) notes that Accomplishments in Chinese under the perfective aspect "may be either terminated or completed" (p. 264). She demonstrates this point by providing a complex sentence where a "simple perfective sentence" is conjoined with "an assertion that the event did not proceed to completion". Her example is similar to the one in (4b), namely: "Wo zuotian xie-le gei Zhangsan de xin, keshi mei xie-wan '*I wrote a letter to Zhangsan yeterday but I didn't finish it.*'" (p. 265). Smith notes that the sentence is "felicitous in Mandarin, as is well-known, though it is contradictory in English" (p. 265). Smith notes that the perfective –*le* in Chinese "presents Accomplishments with an arbitrary final endpoint…" (p. 129). Hence, the termination interpretation is understood to be one where the event stops at an arbitrary final endpoint. For our example (4b), we understand it to mean that John was engaged in the activity of writing a letter but he stopped the activity before the objective of that activity was achieved (i.e., before producing a finished letter). The point at which he stopped the activity is the *arbitrary endpoint* of the event. If he did proceed to complete the letter, then the point at which he completed the letter would be the *natural endpoint* of the event. Smith (1997) also discusses the termination/completion interpretation in English under the perfective aspect. Comparing an Activity situation ("Lily swam in the pond") with an Accomplishment situation ("Mrs. Ramsey wrote a letter"), she notes: "…The Activity sentence conveys termination (Lily stopped swimming) whereas the Accomplishment conveys completion (Mrs. Ramsey finished the letter)…" (67-68)." She also makes the point that Activities have arbitrary endpoints whereas Accomplishments have natural endpoints: "Activities have arbitrary final endpoints, so the final endpoint of [Jasper run] is simply a stage of coming to a stop, after which there are no more stages of running. In contrast, the constellation [Jane build a sandcastle] indicates a telic event, an Accomplishment. The natural final endpoint is reached when the sandcastle is complete" (p. 124).

To explain the source of the difference, Soh & Kuo (2005) follow Chierchia (1998) in assuming that *all* head nouns in Chinese are mass (i.e., [-bounded]). In English, a distinction is made between count nouns [+bounded] and mass [-bounded] nouns.

**Table 4: Count/mass in English and Chinese**

|         | mass [-bounded]  | count [+bounded] |
|---------|------------------|------------------|
| English | [-bounded]       | [+bounded]       |
| Chinese | mass [-bounded]  |                  |

Under this account, during the derivation processes numerals change the noun's boundedness feature from [–bounded] to [+bounded], and elements in D (indefinite determiners, definite determiners, and demonstratives) turn [-bounded] nouns into [±bounded]. Importantly, this change does not affect nouns that already bear the [+bounded] feature. Therefore, English mass nouns[5] as well as all Chinese nouns, when combined with a definite determiner or a demonstrative, will end up being [±bounded]. An English count noun on the other hand will retain its [+bounded] feature after D elements are attached to it. The derivation process is summarized in Table 5. (We abbreviate [+bounded] as [+b] and [-bounded] as [-b].)

**Table 5: Effect of different elements on boundedness feature**

| English | Numeral       |                     | [+b] → no change |
|---------|---------------|---------------------|------------------|
|         | Elements in D | Definite determiner | [+b] → no change |
|         |               |                     | [-b] → [±b]      |
|         |               | Demonstrative       | [+b] → no change |
|         |               |                     | [-b] → [±b]      |
| Chinese | Numeral       |                     | [-b] → [+b]      |
|         | Elements in D | Demonstrative       | [-b] → [±b]      |

A verb phrase containing an object NP bearing the [±bounded] feature can denote either a telic or an atelic event (i.e., receive either a completion or a termination interpretation), whereas a verb phrase with a [+bounded] object NP must denote a telic event and can only receive a completion interpretation. Under Soh & Kuo's account, then, the telicity differences between Chinese and English sentences with definite/demonstrative NP objects stem from differences in the nominal systems of the two languages.

## 5. The Current Study

Following Slabakova (2000), we conducted a rating study where participants read two-clause sentences (e.g. "John read the book, but did not finish reading it" or "John read the book and finished reading it."). The participants' task was to indicate how well the two clauses fit together. All sentences were in English, and we manipulated (i) the nature of the object NP (definite vs. numeral) and (ii) the semantics of the second clause, i.e., whether it is only compatible with a completion interpretation ("and finished reading it") or whether it is compatible with a termination interpretation ("but did not finish reading it"). Thus, participants' ratings serve as an indication of whether they interpret sentences with definite NPs and numeral NPs as having completion or termination interpretations.

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[5] Soh & Kuo, citing Jackenoff (1996) note that a definite mass noun phrase (in English) is ambiguous between a bounded and an unbounded reading as shown by the compatibility with both the durative (*for*) and completive (*in*) time adverbials in the sentence: *Bill ate the custard for hours / in an hour.* (p. 208; example 20 (b))

## 5.1. General predictions

Following the Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis (e.g., Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996), a prevalent SLA acquisition model, we assume that L2 learners of English start out with the L1 grammar, but may be able to subsequently re-structure their inter-language grammar to converge on the properties of English. The predictions for learners at different L2 proficiency levels are spelled out below:

1. Participants whose English proficiency is in the *Low-Intermediate* range (determined through an independent cloze test) will have the Chinese telicity computation in their inter-language grammar, and therefore may interpret Accomplishment VPs with definite NP objects as having a termination interpretation.

2a. Participants whose English proficiency is in the *Advanced* range (once again, determined through an independent cloze test) may have converged on the values of English, having preempted the termination reading for Accomplishment VPs with definite NP objects from their inter-language system. Therefore, they are expected to pattern like native speakers. They are predicted to interpret Accomplishment VPs with definite NP objects as describing completed events rather than terminated events.

2b. On the other hand, it is possible that even *Advanced* learners might be subject to L1 influence in acquiring the correct verb phrase-telicity interpretation mapping for English, considering the subset learning problem they are assumed to be facing. If so, then even such learners may fail to acquire target-like grammar and therefore may interpret Accomplishment VPs with definite NP objects as having a termination interpretation as well.

It should be clear from the formulation of predictions that the criterion for successful acquisition of telicity here is the preemption of the termination reading from the inter-language grammar. As Chinese allows both completion and termination readings for the kinds of sentences that we are testing, acceptance of the completion reading in English by L2 learners could be due to either successful acquisition of the target grammar, or transfer from L1. Therefore, overcoming the L1-based termination interpretation is the acquisition task that the L2 learners in this study are confronted with (as opposed to adding an L2 interpretation).

## 5.2. Participants

Thirty-nine L1 Chinese speakers and 19 L1 English speakers (21 participated; 2 excluded)[6] took part in the study. The L2ers had learned English in classroom settings for an average of about 11 years and had lived in English speaking countries for 1 month - 2.5 years. In keeping with standard practice in SLA, a cloze test was administered to all L2 participants to determine their English proficiency level. Native English participants also took the cloze test so that baseline scores could be established. The cloze test consisted of three short stories with 25 blanks in each story (75 blanks in total) and was developed by Oshita (1997). Participants' scores are equivalent to the number of blanks which they filled in with a correct word. Their performance in the cloze test is summarized in Table 6.

Based on the scores, cut-off points for proficiency levels for the L2 English speakers were determined as shown in Table 7, which also shows the number of L2 English participants in each proficiency group. 62 was used as the cut-off for the advanced group as it was the average score of the L1 English speakers. The next 10 highest scores (50 - 61) were considered to form the intermediate score range. A score of 49 and below was considered to fall into the low proficiency range.[7]

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[6] Two L1 English speakers were excluded because their comments after the experiment indicated that they had inadvertently misunderstood some of the sentences.
[7] Choosing the cut-off for Intermediate and Low proficiency speakers was somewhat arbitrary. However, as the results will show, these two groups performed similarly, suggesting that the choice of cut-off may not matter greatly in this case.

**Table 6: Cloze test results**

|  | Average | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|
| **L1 English (n=18[8])** | 62[9] | 49[9] | 69 |
| **L1 Chinese (n=39)** | 53.46 | 36 | 65 |

**Table 7: Cut-off points for proficiency levels**

| Score Range (total 75) | Proficiency | # of Participants (total 39) |
|---|---|---|
| 62 and above | Advanced | 6 |
| 50 - 61 | Intermediate | 23 |
| 49 and below | Low | 10 |

## 5.3. Test materials and task

Following Slabakova (2000), a rating task was used to elicit aspectual interpretation of complex sentences. Each sentence consisted of two clauses joined by "and" or "but". We manipulated (i) NP type and (ii) interpretation, for a 2x2 design. *NP Type* refers to the type of NP used as the direct object of the first clause, which was a definite NP (e.g. "the book", see *a,c* in Table 8) or a numeral NP ("three books", see *b,d*, in Table 8). *Interpretation* refers to the second clause which states that the event expressed in the first clause is completed ("…and finished reading it/them" in examples *c* and *d*) or terminated ("…, but did not finish reading it/them" in examples *a* and *b*). There were 4 lists for this study with 24 critical sentences per list. In addition, 43 fillers were inserted into each list. The verbs and direct objects used for the experimental sentences are listed in the Appendix.

All sentences were in the simple past tense which is the default perfective aspect in English. Participants were asked to judge how natural they think the combination of clauses is on a five-point scale (1 = Very Unnatural Combination, 5 = Perfectly Natural Combination).[10] They were also asked to rate their confidence level for each judgment, using a five-point scale (1= Not Confident at All, 5 = Very Confident). For reasons of brevity, we focus on the naturalness rating results here. (The average confidence ratings by both L1 controls and L2ers were above 4 for all targets and fillers, which shows that participants were all quite confident about their judgments.)

If a participant considers only a telic interpretation for the event described in the first clause, they should judge the whole sentences as unnatural if the second clause implies a termination reading for the event described in the first clause ("did not finish…"). In contrast, if a participant allows both telic and atelic interpretations for the event described in the first clause, they should judge the whole sentence as natural regardless of whether the second clause implies termination or completion.

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[8] One native speaker's cloze test results were missing. These results are from the remaining 18 native speakers.

[9] As can be seen, even the average native speaker got 17% of the items wrong on our cloze test. Indeed, one native speaker (score = 49) would be classified as a low proficiency speaker on our scale. It could be that our test is a bit challenging, leading to overall low scores. Inherent individual variation or extraneous performance factors might explain the unexpectedly sub-par performance of the one native speaker. It is important to note that the same scoring criteria were applied consistently on both native controls and L2 learners' test results. In addition, a series of one-tailed independent t-tests showed that while there is no significant difference in test scores between Advanced learners and Native controls ($p = 0.36$), the cloze test was able to discriminate Low and Intermediate proficiency learners ($p < 0.01$) as well as Intermediate and Advanced proficiency learners ($p < 0.01$).

[10] During pilot testing, many L1 English participants rated the completion condition sentences low because they felt that the second clause was just repeating information in the first clause. This redundancy/tautology led them to judge the whole sentence as unnatural. To work around this problem, we explicitly stated in the instructions that for the purposes of this experiment, repetition of information between clauses should not be considered unnatural. Both L1 English speakers and L1 Chinese speakers received the same instructions.

**Table 8: Experiment conditions and examples**

|  | Termination | Completion |
|---|---|---|
| **Definite NP** | Definite NP/Termination | Definite NP/Completion |
|  | *a. John read the book, but did not finish reading it.* | *c. John read the book and finished reading it.* |
| **Numeral NP** | Numeral NP/Termination | Numeral NP/Completion |
|  | *b. John read three books, but did not finish reading them.* | *d. John read three books and finished reading them.* |

The expected performance of participants is given in Table 9.

**Table 9: Expected performance**

| Conditions | L1 Chinese | L1 English |
|---|---|---|
| Def NP/Termination (a. *John read the book, but did not finish reading it.*) | √ | × |
| Num NP/Termination (b. *John read three books, but did not finish reading them.*) | × | × |
| Def NP/Completion (c. *John read the book and finished reading it.*) | √ | √ |
| Num NP/Completion (d. *John read three books and finished reading them.*) | √ | √ |

*5.4. Results*
*5.4.1. Group results*

Participants' naturalness ratings were standardized[11] and are presented in Figure 2 by different proficiency levels.

As Figure 2 shows, L1 English controls rated the two Completion conditions ("*John read the book/three books and finished reading it/them*") as more natural than the two Termination conditions ("*John read the book/three books, but did not finish reading it/them*"). This seems to be true of the L2 learners as well. However, while L1 controls and Advanced L2ers' ratings did not seem to be affected by whether the direct object is a Definite NP or a Numeral NP, Low and Intermediate proficiency L2ers showed a striking sensitivity to NP type within the Termination condition: Definite NP sentences receive higher ratings than Numeral NP sentences.

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[11] Standardization was individually performed for each participant, using z-scores which allow us to control for potential individual variation in how participants use the scale. Z-scores are widely used in statistical analyses. Z-scores reflect how much the participant's rating for a given condition differs from his/her average rating for all conditions. A negative z-score means that the participant's rating for that condition is lower than his/her average rating for all conditions. A positive z-score means the opposite.

**Figure 2: Naturalness rating by proficiency**
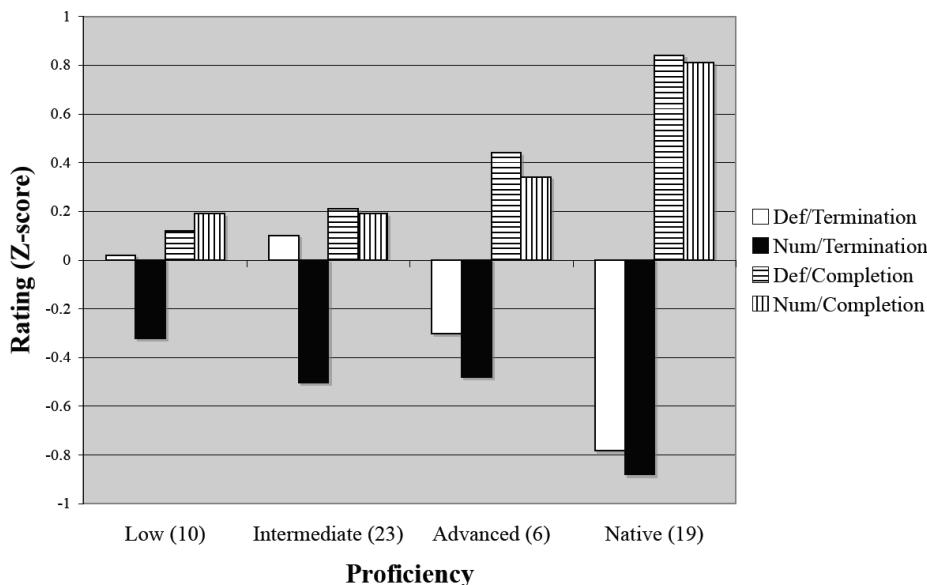


Ratings were submitted to a mixed ANOVA analysis with Interpretation (Termination/Completion) and NP type (Definite/Numeral NP) as within-subjects factors and Proficiency (Low, Intermediate, Advanced, and Native) as the between-subjects factor. We found a main effect of Interpretation: Completion sentences received higher ratings than Termination sentences (F1 (1, 54) = 63.04, *p* < 0.01; F2 (1, 69) = 387.12, *p* < 0.01). The effect of NP type was revealed to be significant as well, with the Definite NP condition receiving overall higher ratings than the Numeral NP condition (F1 (1, 54) = 7.38, *p* < 0.01; F2 (1, 69) = 8.04, *p* < 0.01). No significant main effect was found for the between-subjects factor Proficiency (F1 (3, 54) = 0.26, *p* = 0.85; F2 (2, 69) < 1, *p* = 1). There was a significant Interpretation * NP interaction, driven by the fact that NP type (Definite vs. Numeral) had a greater effect on Termination sentences than on Completion sentences (F1 (1, 54)) = 10.99, *p* < 0.01; F2 (1, 69) = 15.30, *p* < 0.01). Importantly, we found evidence of a significant three-way interaction between Interpretation, NP and Proficiency, meaning that the Interpretation * NP interaction that we detected was different across the different proficiency groups (F1 (3, 54) = 3.12), *p* < 0.05; F2 (2, 69) = 2.74, *p* = 0.07; significant by subjects; marginally significant by items).

To further understand how the proficiency groups differed with respect to the Interpretation * NP interaction, we carried out repeated measures ANOVAs separately on each proficiency group. We found that while learners with Low and Intermediate proficiency did show a significant Interpretation * NP interaction (Low: F1 (1, 9) = 7.47, *p* < 0.05; F2 (1, 23) = 4.71, *p* < 0.05; Intermediate: F1 (1, 22) = 14.49, *p* < 0.01; F2 (1, 23) = 11.72, *p* < 0.01), Advanced proficiency learners and Native speakers did not (Advanced: F1 (1, 5) = 0.51, *p* = 0.51; Native: F1 (1, 18) = 0.57, *p* = 0.46; F2 (1, 23) = 0.57, *p* = 0.46; By-item analysis could not be conducted for the Advanced learners due to the small size of this group, combined with the uneven distribution of the participants across lists.). This means that for Low and Intermediate proficiency learners, NP type (Definite vs. Numeral) had a stronger effect on the Termination condition than on the Completion condition. Such an Interpretation * NP interaction was absent in the Advanced L2ers and Native English speaking controls. Their performance only showed a sensitivity to the effect of Interpretation, with Completion items receiving higher ratings than Termination items (Advanced: F1 (1, 5) = 5.43, *p* = 0.07; Native: F1 (1, 18) = 353.44, *p* < 0.01; F2 (1, 23 = 975.037), *p* < 0.01). (Marginal significance for Advanced learners in the by-subjects analysis.)

Additionally, paired T-tests were conducted on Low (n=10) and Intermediate (n=23) proficiency learners' ratings. Neither group made a significant distinction between the Definite NP/Completion ("*John read the book and finished reading it.*") and Numeral NP/Completion conditions ("*John read three books and finished reading them.*") (Low: t1(9) = -0.645, *p* = 0.54, t2(23) = -1.052, *p* = 0.3; Intermediate : t1(22) = 0.188, *p*=0.85, t2(23) = -0.021, *p*=0.98). As to the two Termination conditions, Intermediate proficiency participants' ratings showed a significantly higher mean for the Definite

NP/Termination condition ("*John read the book, but did not finish reading it.*") than for the Numeral NP/Termination condition ("*John read three books, but did not finish reading them.*") (t1(22) = 4.323, $p < 0.01$, t2(23) = 3.866, $p < 0.01$). For Low proficiency speakers, no stable differences were found between the two Termination conditions, although the by-item analysis showed marginal significance (t1(9) = 1.773, $p = 0.11$, t2(23) = 1.895, $p = 0.07$). The absence of statistically significant contrasts despite the presence of a significant interaction for Low proficiency speakers may be due to the small size of the low-proficiency group (10 participants) and the high level of variation observed in this group.

In sum, group results reveal that non-Advanced L2ers' performance shows influence from L1 as their ratings on L2 English sentences showed a preference for Definite NP object sentences over Numeral NP object sentences when the Termination interpretation was implied. Advanced learners seem to behave like Native speakers in preferring Completion sentences to Termination sentences overall, and neither group's performance showed an interaction effect.

## 5.4.2. Individual results and results by verb

We also examined the acceptance and rejection rates of each condition for each participant. Following Gabriele (2009), we looked at the data for each condition and looked at how individual participants perform in that condition. If a participant's z-score ratings were greater than 0 for 75% or more of the items in that condition (in our case, 4 out of the 6 items per condition), that participant was classified as '*accepting*' sentences in that condition. (See footnote 11 for an explanation of z-scores.) However, if a participant's z-score ratings were less than 0 for 75% or more of the items in that condition (in our case, 4 out of the 6 items per condition), that participant was classified as '*rejecting*' sentences in that condition. All other patterns[12] were categorized as 'other,' as they do not show strong acceptance or rejection patterns.

The number and percentage of participants in each category are summarized in Table 10 for the Termination conditions and Table 11 for the Completion conditions. This allows us to see, for each of the four conditions, how many participants 'accept' sentences in that condition and how many participants 'reject' sentences in that condition, broken down by proficiency level.

**Table 10: Individual results (Termination conditions)**

| Proficiency | Termination (Definite NP) | | | Termination (Numeral NP) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Accept | Reject | Other | Accept | Reject | Other |
| Low (n = 10) | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) | 7 (70%) | 2 (20%) | 5 (50%) | 3 (30%) |
| Intermediate (n = 23) | 7 (30%) | 7 (30%) | 9 (39%) | 6 (26%) | 12 (52%) | 5 (22%) |
| Advanced (n = 6) | 2 (33%) | 2 (33%) | 2 (33%) | 1 (17%) | 2 (33%) | 3 (50%) |
| Native (n = 19) | 1 (5%) | 17 (89%) | 1 (5%) | 0 (0%) | 18 (95%) | 1 (5%) |

What is immediately clear from the individual analysis is that L2 participants performed worst in the condition that was predicted to be problematic – Termination sentences with Definite NPs as direct objects (Table 10, first column). There, target-like performance (rejection) was witnessed in 10% of Low-proficiency, 30% of Intermediate-proficiency and 33% of Advanced-proficiency learners, compared with 89% of Native controls. Many L2 participants failed to show clear 'acceptance' or 'rejection' patterns in this condition ('Other' category: 70% of Low; 39% of Intermediate; 17% of Advanced proficiency). For the other Termination condition (with Numeral NP objects) which was not predicted to be problematic, L2 performance was comparatively much better, with 50% of Low and 52% of Intermediate proficiency learners correctly rejecting this condition, even though these percentages are still much lower than Native controls 95% of whom performed accurately.

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[12] These include some participants who accepted 3 items and rejected the remaining 3. Mostly however they were cases where participants' standardized ratings were 0 for the majority of the items. Due to space limitations, we do not make any further distinctions between these different cases and group them together in the 'Other' category.

Interestingly, only 33% of Advanced L2 learners showed target-like performance on this condition. Once again, many L2 participants failed to show clear 'acceptance' or 'rejection' ('Other' category: 30% of Low; 22% of Intermediate; 50% of Advanced).

**Table 11: Individual results (Completion conditions)**

| Proficiency | Completion (Definite NP) | | | Completion (Numeral NP) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Accept | Reject | Other | Accept | Reject | Other |
| Low (n = 10) | 5 (50%) | 1 (10%) | 4 (40%) | 5 (50%) | 1 (10%) | 4 (40%) |
| Intermediate (n = 23) | 11 (48%) | 6 (26%) | 6 (26%) | 12 (52%) | 5 (22%) | 6 (26%) |
| Advanced (n = 6) | 4 (67%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (33%) | 4 (67%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (33%) |
| Native (n = 19) | 18 (95%) | 1 (5%) | 0 (0%) | 17 (89%) | 1 (5%) | 1 (5%) |

In contrast to the Termination conditions, in the Completion conditions the effect of NP manipulation seems to disappear. Participants at all levels of proficiency performed equally well in the Definite NP and Numeral NP conditions, with around 50% of the participants at all levels correctly accepting the Completion sentences (See Table 11). Their performance though still lagged behind that of Native controls: The overwhelming majority of Native controls (95% and 89%) accepted the two Completion conditions. Just like in the Termination conditions, many L2 participants' performance in the Completion conditions did not show clear 'acceptance' or 'rejection' patterns.

Even though a direct comparison between L2 learners (including Advanced proficiency) and Native controls would appear to show un-target-like L2 performance in *all* conditions, an examination of L2ers' sensitivity to NP type manipulation with Interpretation being held constant reveals a picture that is generally consistent with our predictions as well as the group results:

1) *Termination Conditions*: Low and Intermediate L2 learners generally performed better with the Numeral NP than the Definite NP sentences, a result that can be attributed to L1 influence. Consistent with the group results discussed in Section 5.4.1., Advanced learners (just like Native controls) did not seem to make a distinction between the two Termination conditions, although the individual analysis seems to suggest that the majority of them did not actually perform in a target-like fashion, an insight that was not immediately obvious from the group results.

2) *Completion Conditions*: L2 learners' performance in the two Completion conditions was comparable as roughly the same percentages of participants correctly accepted both Completion conditions. This is consistent with the group results which suggested no distinction made between the two Completion conditions by the L2 participants (or the Native controls).

One might ask why the L2 participants seemed to have problems even with Completion conditions in the sense of not rating them as high as Native controls did (as reflected in both the group and individual results). Problematic performance was not predicted for these conditions. We surmise that the relatively low ratings by L2 participants for the Completion conditions may be related to the standard z-score transformation (see footnote 11). Their raw-score ratings were quite similar to those of Native controls, as shown in Table 12 (see shaded area). More specifically, an examination of the raw scores shows that L2 participants' overall means were higher than those of Native controls, leading to overall lower values for the standardized scores for all conditions. As this paper is not focused on methodology issues, we will not further dwell on the standardization process.

Importantly, we would like to draw readers' attention to the contrastive performance by L2 participants in the different conditions. It is observed that manipulation of the NP type (Definite vs. Numeral) did not seem to have an effect on L2 learners' ratings on the Completion conditions, a pattern that was also observed in Native controls. By contrast, while Native controls' performance in the Termination conditions was similarly not affected by NP type, L2 learners' performance was. In other words, we do not measure L2 learners' performance directly against that of Native controls. Rather, we try to ascertain whether participants made a contrast between the relevant experiment conditions and compare L2ers and controls in this respect. This approach seems to be supported by other researchers such as Hawkins (2008), who remarked: "…The important point is whether subjects are making the relevant contrast, and not whether their judgments are categorical" (p. 468). Hawkins

cites White (2003: 29-30) as another source that shares this view. At the same time, we acknowledge that there are many SLA researchers whose analyses are informed by direct comparisons between learners and controls.

**Table 12: Naturalness ratings (raw scores)**

| Condition | Low (10) | Intermed (23) | Advanced (6) | L1 English (19) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Def/Termination | 4.28 | 3.83 | 3.64 | 1.82 |
| Num/Termination | 4.02 | 3.4 | 3.53 | 1.68 |
| Def/Completion | 4.4 | 4.01 | 4.19 | 4.21 |
| Num/Completion | 4.42 | 3.98 | 4.11 | 4.24 |

Furthermore, following previous studies on L2 aspect/telicity (Gabriele, 2009; 2010; Kaku 2010), we also calculated the overall mean response for each verb in each condition, to see if any verbs were particularly problematic. We did not find any verbs that consistently posed difficulty for L2 learners in all four conditions. (We define difficult verbs as those which elicit non-native-like positive ratings for Termination sentences and non-native-like negative ratings for Completion sentences). Interestingly, we find that in the Definite NP/Termination condition, *read* (M = 0.34) and *wrote* (M = 0.19) elicited less accurate responses from learners than the other four verbs (*drew*, M = -0.19; *drank*, M = -0.14; *ate*, M = -0.05; *sewed*, M = -0.05). None of the verbs caused problems in the Numeral NP/Termination condition (all negative ratings). For the Completion sentences, only *drank* (M = -0.04) seemed to cause problems in the Numeral NP/Completion condition. Learners demonstrated relatively accurate performance with the other verbs and in the other Completion condition (with Definite NP objects). Thus, at least on the basis of the analyses that we have done soar far, it appears that the general findings we have presented in this paper cannot be straightforwardly 'blamed on' a particular verb or verbs, and seem to be a more general phenomenon connected to Accomplishment VPs.

### 5.4.3. Discussion of L2 results

Following the analysis proposed by Soh & Kuo (2005) on the differences between Chinese and English, one may tentatively analyze the interlanguage grammar of the majority of the L2 participants as still retaining the Chinese value for the boundedness feature of count nouns. As discussed above in Section 4.2., according to Soh & Kuo, Chinese head nouns are [-bounded]. The telicity judgment patterns exhibited by the L2 participants in our study suggest that the English head nouns in their interlanguage grammar also bear a [-bounded] feature. Given this representation, *definite NPs* will end up bearing the [±bounded] feature in these learners' grammars, instead of the [+bounded] feature that it has in L1 English speakers' grammars. As a consequence, the expectation is that learners will incorrectly allow both Completion and Termination readings for English Accomplishment VPs with definite NP objects – i.e., they will fail to realize that Termination readings should not be available with definite NP objects. Indeed, this seems to be what we observed for the low-intermediate proficiency groups. In contrast, for some of the more advanced participants who showed convergence on the target English grammar (dispreference for Termination interpretation even for verb phrases containing definite NPs), one may then speculate that their grammar has the correct value for English boundedness feature of count nouns: [+bounded].

On the other hand, even though the L2 learners' grammar may misrepresent English head nouns as being [-bounded], according to Soh & Kuo's analysis the derivation process for *numeral NPs* results in the boundedness feature being turned to [+bounded]. Hence a Termination interpretation should be ruled out (or perhaps strongly dispreferred) for verb phrases with numeral NP objects. In this respect, then, L1 Chinese/L2 English speakers are predicted to pattern like L1 English speakers, which is indeed what our findings seem to suggest.

# 6. General Discussion and Conclusions

This study set out to investigate L1 Chinese speakers' acquisition of telicity interpretations for Accomplishment situations in English. Unlike English, Chinese Accomplishment VPs with definite NP objects can denote both telic and atelic events. This difference was posited to be a source of transfer when L1 Chinese speakers acquire L2 English aspectual semantics.

The results of this study point to considerable L1 influence in the acquisition of telicity for verb phrases in L2 English. This is evidenced by the fact that the majority of the learners in this study, including some Advanced L2ers, were unable to preempt the termination interpretation. It was suggested that such learners may still retain the L1 feature value for Chinese head nouns (i.e., [-bounded]), resulting in the Termination reading being accepted by these learners. On the other hand, re-structuring of grammar is possible, as suggested by the finding that Advanced learners to some extent exhibited target-like performance. This constitutes evidence that they might have successfully preempted the L1-based Termination reading. Therefore, as learners' proficiency increases, so does the likelihood of successful convergence on the English grammar.

The results of our study support the position that un-learning L1 properties which require negative evidence poses difficulties. *First language acquisition* generally proceeds on the basis of positive input, possibly aided by the Subset Principle. That is, "L1 acquirers appear not to adopt parameter values of UG which generate superset languages unless the input data warrant it, thus never making certain problematical kinds of overgeneralization" (White, 1991, p.134). Hence, negative evidence is generally argued to be unnecessary for L1 acquisition. In contrast, L2 learners come to the acquisition task with an existing grammar, and therefore may make incorrect generalizations on that basis. Negative evidence may be needed to rule out L1 options that are not compatible with the L2 grammar.

As mentioned in Section 3.1., results from existing studies are not unanimous on the necessity of negative evidence in un-learning L1 settings. Some studies point to its facilitative role when negative evidence is provided, or the lack of learning success when such evidence is needed but unavailable (e.g., White (1991); Gabriele (2009)). Others however found that learners were nonetheless able to successfully acquire target-like properties despite the fact that their learning situations require negative evidence and that such evidence is apparently not available (e.g., Yuan (2001); Trapman & Kager (2009)).

In our study, L1 Chinese and L2 English are in a superset–subset relationship with respect to the phenomenon under investigation: Chinese allowing two interpretations (Completion and Termination) for certain sentences and English allowing just one interpretation (Completion). It is a classical learning situation that is argued to require negative evidence for the learner to preempt the illicit L1 option. As the results of this study suggest, the learners as a group were not able to preempt the L1-based termination interpretation, resulting in failure to converge on the L2 grammar. However, our findings indicate that learners in the Advanced proficiency range did manage to preempt L1 grammar and successfully acquire L2 telicity.

Another reason why the lower-intermediate proficiency participants had difficulties arriving at the right interpretation might be related to the robustness of input cues for the particular grammar property being acquired (Gabriele, 2009). There could be a difference between learning word order and phonotactics on one hand (White, 1991; Yuan, 2001; Trampman & Kager, 2009) and semantics on the other (e.g., Gabriele, 2009 and this study). For word order and phonotactics, surface forms provide transparent cues as to the permissible structure in the language. For example, the string "Mary often watches television" clearly indicates the word order in English to be S-Adv-V-O.

On the other hand, learning a semantic property such as the telicity interpretation investigated in our study is essentially learning a form-meaning mapping which requires information from the broader context[13], beyond the sentence itself. For example, the sentence "Mary ate the apple" itself does not

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[13] An anonymous reviewer points out that our study did not actually provide contexts. It is true that our experiment tapping learners' telicity interpretation did not include a context (e.g., a story depicting a completed/incompleted event). It is worth noting that our argument is *not* that the rating results are attributed to the experiment design in any way, but that learning tasks (which would take place outside the experiment) that require contextual support could be potentially difficult for learners. And this difficulty could be an explanation for the L2 performance in the experiment since telicity, a semantic phenomenon would need/benefit from contextual support.

provide information on whether the eating event was completed or not. In actual communication settings, context may bias the interpretation towards one or the other. But the very fact that context is needed for learning may make the task more difficult, compared with learning tasks that only involve noticing surface forms (see also Roberts, Gullberg & Indefrey 2008 for related work on learners' difficulties with integrating information from different sources).

Even with access to the semantic context, some input in English could potentially mislead learners into thinking that L1 and L2 are similar.[14] As shown in Section 4.3., under Soh & Kuo (2005)'s analysis, mass nouns with a definite determiner (e.g., "eat the custard" or "drink the wine") are actually ±bounded at the end of the computation, leading to both telic and atelic interpretations for the event, similar to all accomplishments in Chinese. If Chinese speakers have trouble distinguishing mass from count nouns in English, then the accomplishment VPs with mass nouns in English might mislead learners into thinking that English and Chinese work similarly with respect to telicity. A study by Hua & Lee (2005) does point to some difficulty on the part of Chinese speakers in understanding the count-mass distinction in English. In conclusion, it seems that, when predicting acquisition outcome, it may be beneficial to consider both the learnability issue (superset – subset relationship between L1/L2) and the nature of the specific property being acquired.

## Appendix: Verbs and objects used in the study

| Verb | Noun | Verb | Noun |
|---|---|---|---|
| draw | picture | read | book |
| | portrait | | novel |
| | human figure | | magazine |
| | cartoon character | | periodical |
| sew | dress | eat | apple |
| | suit | | orange |
| | blouse | | pear |
| | jacket | | peach |
| write | letter | drink | bowl of soup |
| | essay | | cup of coffee |
| | report | | glass of milk |
| | article | | glass of lemonade |

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[14] We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to us.

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