

An Optimization Method of Acquiring English Progressive Aspect

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Abstract: This study introduces the tense/aspect systems in English and Chinese, and collected some data from 50 intermediate Chinese English Learners. The data shows that the explanation of Chinese aspect marker *zhe* significantly enhances the ratio of the right English progressive forms, in other words, the rate of those varied wrong choices is decreased. Therefore the conclusion is that the Chinese aspect marker *zhe* has a significant effect on the acquisition of English progressive acquisition.

1 Introduction

Temporal notion of aspect is essential to human languages, so tense/aspect has long been the subject of studies for linguists from different perspectives in the field of SLA. But most of the two languages involved in the studies are typologically similar and there are few empirical studies. In order to arrive at some universal tendency, it is the best to examine some typologically different languages. Chinese and English are typologically very distinct. Generally speaking, many linguists hold the view that English is a “tense language”. Chinese is described as an aspect marking language without grammaticalized tense distinction. Temporal adverbials, rather than verb inflections are used to express Chinese deictic temporal relations. As a tenseless language, Chinese temporal locations of events employ pragmatic devices (context clues, chronological order in notion, etc.); lexical expressions (yesterday, today, the next day, last year, this year, next year, etc.); or indirectly used aspect markers.

And Chinese has a very high aspectual system consisting of a number of aspect markers like the perfective markers *le*(了) and *guo*(过), and the imperfective markers *zai*(在) and *zhe*(着) (Wang 1984[1]; Mathew and Yip 1994[2]). One of the characteristics of English tense/aspect in English-learner language is that verbs are always affected by obligatory contexts in SLA. Another characteristic is that English tense/aspect is mainly realized via adding verbal morphologies or markings to verbs, such marking as -ing for progressive, -ed for past tense, -s or -es for the third person simple present etc, while Chinese aspect is mostly indicated by putting Chinese aspect markers after or before verbs, such aspect markers are *zhe*, *zai* for progressive, *le*, *guo* for past tense, and so on. This research only aims to investigate the effect of Chinese progressive aspect marker *zhe* on English progressive aspect marking in language-learner language for Chinese learners with English as L2, so it will mainly discuss imperfective aspect marker *zhe* (着).

The task of acquiring the progressive aspect is not as easy as it may appear. Even in L1 acquisition of the progressive aspect, which was supposed to be uniquely effortless and error-free, errors of overusing or under-using the progressive aspect can be observed. For Chinese learners it is even more challenging. They need to distinguish between types of verbs with different temporal semantics and figure out their compatibility with the progressive aspect. And the fully-developed tense-aspect system in the tense-less language with rich aspectual markers, which has already existed in Chinese EFL learners' mind, interacts in intricate ways with the new system to be acquired.

In the past, tense/aspect has received considerable attention in both theoretical and empirical studies. Aspect is usually divided into grammatical aspect and lexical aspect. Grammatical aspect

can be further categorized into perfective aspect and imperfective aspect. According to Comrie (1976) [3], the former indicates the view of a single situation as a whole, while the latter makes explicit reference to the internal temporary structure of a situation. Vendler (1967)[4] distinguished them between (a) Statives, as the verbs *to know* and *to be happy*; (b) Activities, as the verbs *to run* and *to talk*; (c) Accomplishments, as *to build a house* and *to swim across the river*; (d) Achievements, as *to reach* and *to find*. Smith (1997) separated verbs and verb phrases into five groups: (a) States are static, durative (e.g. know the answer, love Mary). (b) Activities are dynamic, durative, atelic events (e.g. laugh, stroll in the park). (c) Accomplishments are dynamic, durative, telic events consisting of a process with successive stages and outcomes (e.g. build a house, walk to school, learn Greek). (d) Achievements are dynamic, telic, instantaneous events (e.g. win the race, reach the top) (Smith, 1997: 3)[5].

Tai (1984)[6] makes a contrast between Chinese and English. He proposes that state verbs and activity verbs in Chinese have the same properties of indefinite time as in English. However, in Chinese, there are no counterparts for some English accomplishment verbs, such as *Learn* and *kill*. In Chinese we have *xue-hui* and *sha-si*, which are expressed in the verb form of resultative verb compound. As for achievement verbs, we have resultative verb compounds in Chinese, which are not different from the equivalent English accomplishment verbs such as *kanjian* for see. According to Tai, all the resultative verbs, both compound form and simple form, are categorized as a result category expressing a “result aspect.” There are still other scholars who combine accomplishments and achievements. They believe that both accomplishments and achievements have one common feature of having an end point. Bardovi-Harlig (1998)[7] found that the progressive aspect associates overwhelmingly with activities. It was also found that acquisition of progressive aspect does not progress uniformly. Tense/aspect researches have made some significant progresses as well in China (Yang, Huang, 1998[8]; Cai, 2002[9]).

2 Experiment

2.1 Subjects:

The present study is based on 50 sophomore learners of non-English majors, who are learning English and other different subjects now in Xi'an Shi You University. At the time of participating in this study, they are nineteen to twenty one years old. (None of them know that they are participating in a certain kind of study.) And the 50 sophomore learners share similar English-learning experiences, though they are from different classes. They all started to learn English formally since junior middle school, and they have finished two terms and a half of college English learning in different classes of the same university with the same English textbooks and teachers.

Thus their English learning experiences had been mostly based on classroom instructions with the general English level inferior to CET-4 (College English Test Band-4). And the instructions of English grammar knowledge they get are almost the same because they all used the same kind of English textbooks in junior and senior high school, though they have different English teachers. All of them come from Shaanxi province, and they could speak Putonghua despite their Shaanxi dialects, just in case of the influences of other dialects with special usages of *zhe*.

2.2 Materials:

Table1: the 10 Chinese sentences for translation with *zhe*

Items	English Sentences
Present progressive	1. The sun is shining, the bees are humming, the birds are singing, the fruit is ripening.
Present progressive	7. It is nice to be sitting here with you.
Past progressive	10. He was sitting here at 9 o'clock this morning.
Past progressive	3. At that time, Henry was feeling his way along the face of the cliff.
Future progressive	6. This time tomorrow I'll be lying on a beach in Tunisia.
Present perfect progressive	9. We've just been talking about you.
Participle progressive	5. He likes to read the newspaper while eating.
Simple past	8. As we walked along, it began to grow dark.
Simple present	2. It is quit near, let's go there on foot.
State	4. There is a picture on the wall.

Those 10 Chinese sentences in table 1 were selected from five different grammar books. And there is the Chinese character *zhe* in each of them. As for the present progressive aspect and past progress aspect, there are two sentences for each because they are used and appear frequently than the others in students' writing and exercises.

2.3 Design:

In order to tackle with the problem and explore some general regularities about English progressive aspect acquisition, the intention of this study is to find out what is the influence of Chinese particle *zhe* on the acquisition of English imperfective aspect, and what are the effects of Chinese particle *zhe* on English imperfective aspect marking in the obligatory context. 50 sophomores of non-English major were selected randomly and divided into two groups. And 10 Chinese sentences were selected. CET-4 is very important for college students because they can fine a good job if they can have higher markers in the it. So students usually do a lot of CET-4 model tests or some extra exercises, e.g. Chinese-English translation exercises, which are one type of questions in CET-4. Therefore, the author elaborately spends some time on those translation questions in the textbooks before the last data is collected. When the experiment comes, first, it must be assured that it is a translation exercise as usual, which will make sure the reliability of the experiment. And then, it must be assured that the first group of participants is not given any explanation, while the second group of participants is given a short lecture about the Chinese usages of *zhe*. After that, the two groups are given 20 minutes to translate the 10 Chinese sentences into English, and the translation versions given by students are collected by their teachers immediately when time is up.

2.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis:

Table 2: The collected data (scores)

Scores (first group)	Frequen cy	Scores (second gro up)	Frequen cy
30	1	50	2
40	1	60	2
50	2	70	8
60	5	80	6
70	5	90	6
80	8	100	1
90	3		

As the table show, the second group of participants, who are given the explanation of *zhe*, have comparatively higher marks than the first group of participants. Only two of the students in the second group got 50, which is the lowest mark of this group. And most of them have scores from 70 to 100. The mean is 76, and the variance is 10.15. However, the scores of the students in the first group range from 30 to 90. The mean of this group is 69.2 with the variance of 12.22. To compare these two means, the mean of the second group is obviously higher than that of the first group, while the variance of the second group is lower than of the first one, which means the distance from those second separate scores to their mean is reduced.

As Chinese native speakers, the participants basically understand the implying meaning of *zhe*, functioning as a progressive aspectual marker. Markedness Differentials Hypothesis postulates that the degree of markedness equals the degree of difficulty. (Eckman, 1977)[10]. English verbs, which express the dynamic and durative meaning (activity and accomplishment) can be converted to progressive aspect with -ing; and Chinese aspect marker *zhe* can also occur after verbs expressing dynamic and durative meaning. Therefore, in the current data, English progressive is different and not more marked than Chinese verb+*zhe* like the third rule of Eckman: “Those areas of the TL that are different from the NL, but are not more marked than the NL will not be difficult.” So the learners cognitively feel English progressive to be easy and tend to produce progressive forms when the relatively difficult construction of verb+*zhe* is available in the Chinese counterparts because of the language transfer of L1.

When learners (English as L2) translate sentences into English, the aspect marker *zhe* in their mind reminded them that English progressive should be used, thus raising the rate of progressive marking. And it is subconscious for Chinese people to speak of and receive some occurrences with Chinese *zhe* as something that is generally happening because learners cognitively transfer Chinese aspect marker *zhe* (L1) into English progressive marking -ing(L2). Therefore, the knowledge of Chinese aspect marker *zhe* generally is first stored in their neural networks as L1. Once frequently encountering English progressive, learners can easily activate their knowledge on Chinese imperfective aspect marker *zhe* through the network that consists of nodes connected by pathways. That is why Chinese aspect marker *zhe* is often translated into similar regular patterns of verb+ing with the verbs in the present study.

To summarize, from the point of MDH, it is inferred that the language transfer does occur between Chinese (L1) and English (L2) from aspect marker *zhe* to progressive marking -ing or others.

The distribution of these wrong sentences:

Items	Frequency without <i>zhe</i>	Frequency with <i>zhe</i>
Past progressive	17	5
Present progressive	10	6
Present perfective progressive	24	19
Particle progressive	6	2
Future progressive	6	6
Progressive for state	21	19
The total	84	57

These wrong sentences in the second group are only 54, compared with the first one having 84, which shows that the mistakes are significantly reduced. Up to the specific items, the Past progressive mistakes reduced from 17 to 5; the Present progressive from 10 to 6; the Present perfective progressive from 24 to 19, the Participle progressive from 6 to 2, the rest is not very obvious. Generally speaking, the students, especially the students with the simple explanation of the usage of *zhe*, did well for the first six sentences. (The total number of the wrong sentences seems not small in the Table because for Past progressive, and Present progressive, there are two sentences for each.) This may be the reason that the simple progressives (Past progressive, Present progressive, Future progressive) are comparatively simple and are frequently used and appeared than the others in writing and in exercises by students. And the structures and usage of *zhe* in these original Chinese sentences indicating the simple progressives, especially the Present progressive aspect are easy to understand and learn to use.

In sentence 8 we have “*zou zhe zou zhe*”, in sentence 9 “*tan ni lai zhe*”. The usage of these two Chinese phrases are complicated and difficult to understand. Especially, the phrase of “*tan ni lai zhe*” is not frequently, and somewhat seldom used in our daily speaking. So, most students are not clear about the usage of *zhe* in these two sentences and give wrong translation versions. For sentence 8, we have various wrong translations, learner language or interlanguage, we may call, such as ‘It is already darker while we are walking’. ‘It’s getting dark when we are walking’. In the phrase “*zou zhe zou zhe*”, *zhe* is used repeatedly indicating that one action is accompanied by another action, and past tense is usually used, but the present progressive is used in most of those wrong sentences, and some of the present progressive aspect is not complete with only verb+*ing* as “we walking”. Just as Bardovi-harlig & Reynolds found that acquisition of progressive aspect does not progress uniformly. In past-time contexts, the bare progressive marking *-ing* was found to emerge first, followed by the present progressive, and finally the past progressive

Most of the wrong versions for sentence 9 are these: ‘We are talking about you.’ ‘We were talking about you just now.’ The present progressive and the past progressive are used here but actually the present perfect progressive is needed. “*Tan ni lai zhe*” in Chinese usually indicates that a certain action has continued for some time and it may still go on for some more time. For sentence 10, most of the wrong sentences given by students are ‘He sat here at 9 o’clock this morning.’ ‘He sat here at 9 a.m.’ ‘He was seated here at 9 o’clock this morning.’ “*Zao chen jiu dian*” is a specific time in the past, and, therefore, the past progressive should be used in this sentence, because the action of verbs, which happened at a specific time in the past is the indication of past progressives.

In the sentence ‘He was sit here at 9 o’clock in the morning.’ “was sit” is a strange, and more interesting form. It seems that the student has been conscious of the past; but he seemed to forget the progressive marker *-ing*. This is a very strange error.

According to T-test, the value is about 7.25, which is higher than the critical standard value 2.01 ($f=48$, $\alpha=0.05$, two sided). It implies that the explanation of *zhe* could facilitate English progressive marker *-ing*, and could somehow enhance the acquisition of English progressive aspect. This is because English progressive aspect is mainly realized through verbal morphology. Therefore, the acquisition of verbal morphology of English progressive marking perhaps entails the acquisition of English progressive aspect.

3 Conclusion

As mentioned above, the English imperfective aspect still has both higher frequency and higher error rate in English-learner language for Chinese learners with English as L2. The learners’ higher error rate may not only be a sign of non-learning, learning failure, or carelessness, but the evidence of the system of English-learner language. Nevertheless, this study could partially illustrate and demonstrate the distribution of English imperfective aspect errors, and then bring the basic law to the general regularity in L2 learning. And L1 transfer could give a relatively rational explanation to the acquisition of English imperfective aspect in L2. The major findings obtained on the basis of research questions can be stated as following:

The presence of *zhe* significantly facilitates the English progressive marking ($7.25 > 2.01$), which indicates that Chinese aspect marker *zhe* perhaps could enhance the acquisition of English progressive aspect. It was also found that (just as suggested by Bardovi-harlig & Reynolds) acquisition of progressive aspect does not progress uniformly. In contexts, the bare progressive marking *-ing* was found to emerge first, followed by the present progressive, and finally the past progressive. In this way, while the use of the aspect and tense markers becomes increasingly target-like, the association of progressive to other non-prototypical verb classes is surprisingly halting, this is an observation not compatible with the predictions of the Aspect Hypothesis.

The second theoretical implication is that the present study has confirmed that the L1 positive influence on the acquisition of L2. This study found that the aspect marker *zhe* in Chinese exhibits significant effects on the acquisition of English progressive aspect in English as L2 with the use of the aspect markers becoming increasingly target-like. The present study also has some pedagogical implications for L2 pedagogy. L1 transfer should be effectively exploited in English teaching. This study has identified the facilitating effects of the aspect *zhe* on the acquisition of English progressive aspect, so we should take advantage its facilitating roles in teaching English progressive aspect. At the same time, we should, however, try to understand the interfering effects of these aspect markers and avoid the negative transfer they may bring about. In one word, English teachers are better advised to make full use of the positive transfer and conquer the negative transfer in order to enhance the English teaching.

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