

Reasons for the use of past verb tenses by Mandarin-speaking ESL learners

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated the contexts in which a group of native Mandarin English as a second language learners, with high knowledge of the simple past tense, used the present perfect, past perfect and past progressive on a fill-in-the-gaps task. The participants frequently correctly used the past perfect form on a task item requiring these forms, but they also often oversupplied the present perfect, past perfect and, to a lesser extent, the past progressive, on the task. Participants who correctly supplied the past perfect had a higher overall level of grammatical knowledge than those who did not. On a verbal protocols task, the learners reported that the presence of adverbials sometimes led them to their choice of the present perfect or past perfect. The oversuppliances of the past progressive were primarily atelic activities. These results mirror other studies in the confusion between past tense forms, influence of adverbials and lexical aspect. They may also possibly indicate L1 influence from Mandarin.

Keywords: Past perfect, past progressive, present perfect.

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1. Introduction

The acquisition of past tense–aspect morphology forms by language learners, particularly English learners, has been of some interest for some time (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Collins, 2002; Yang & Huang, 2004). Amongst the most researched areas in the choice of verb tense/aspect by adult English learners is the effect of lexical aspect (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan, 2008). There has also been some longitudinal research conducted, which indicates that there is a typical developmental sequence in learning the use of English past tense–aspect forms. Namely, English as a second language (ESL) learners tend to learn to use the simple past tense correctly before using the past progressive, and that use of the past progressive precedes the emergence of the present perfect, which in turn precedes the emergence of the past perfect (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan, 2008). However, within the order of emergence of verb tense–aspect forms, there is a great deal of individual variation (Housen, 2002). There is also research indicating that learners tend to mix up similar verb tense–aspect forms. ESL learners tend to confuse the use of the present perfect with the simple past, and to a lesser extent, the past perfect (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). Some studies also support the contention that adverbials play a role in the use of past tense morphology (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995). In addition, some research indicates that L1 influence may play a role in the acquisition of past tense–aspect forms (Collins, 2002; Tiittanen, 2013; Yang & Huang, 2004; Zhang & Liu, 2016).

However, little research has been conducted on investigating *why* ESL learners who have a good level of knowledge of the simple past tense, use the present perfect, past perfect and the past progressive form *from their perspective*, both correctly as well as incorrectly. Verbal protocols have been used within studies of adult L2 learner awareness of grammar (Roehr, 2004), and as such appear to offer a fruitful methodology to better understand how adult L2 learners understand the present perfect, past perfect and past progressive forms. This study is exploratory in nature and aims to gain greater insight into L2 learner uses of the above verb tense–aspect forms on a task which promotes focus on form, a fill-in-the-gaps task, with the aid of verbal protocols methodology.

ESL learners have problems with the correct use of past verb tense morphology (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Tiittanen, 2013, 2015; Uno, 2014; Yang & Huang, 2004). One possible reason is that learning to distinguish between the uses of the many past tense–aspect forms is a complex task for adult ESL learners. The nature of linguistic complexity is interpreted by researchers in different ways (Bulte & Housen, 2012). One view of complexity, relevant to this research, is that linguistic complexity may partially be a matter of the existence of many forms for one tense, such as the past tense (Bulte & Housen, 2012; Pallotti, 2015). English has many possible verb tense–aspect forms to refer to past time, such as the simple past, past progressive, present perfect and the past perfect. This is relevant for another view of linguistic complexity, that of functional complexity, which refers to the existence of a multiplicity of relationships between forms and the functions/meanings of these forms (Brezina & Pallotti, 2016; Bulte & Housen, 2012) because there is no simple one-to-one relationship between form and meaning/function for the past progressive, present perfect or the past perfect (Cowan, 2008). This may be problematic for ESL learners. There is research evidence showing that ESL learners often mix up past verb tense–aspect forms and frequently do not know how and when to use them (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000).

L2 learners are influenced by certain cognitive principles in their learning of verb tense–aspect forms. Previous studies of L2 tense–aspect acquisition have found that L2 learners at all levels of development more frequently use prototypical combinations of tense and aspect than non-prototypical combinations (Li & Shirai, 2000). For instance, Tiittanen (2019) found that the ESL participants in his study used progressive verb forms primarily with activities. This has ramifications in terms of the influence of lexical aspect on verb tense–aspect forms (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995; Collins, 2004; Housen, 2002). Because of the lexical aspect, there are findings that learners of English, irrespective of their L1, show a tendency to add the progressive *-ing* affix to verbs that semantically

entail an ongoing situation or something dynamic (e.g. play, swim, run) ...' (Dose-Heidelmayer &Gotz, 2016, p. 232).

There is also research evidence indicating that adverbials may play a role in the use of the English past tense by L2 learners. One such study investigated the use of L2 past tense morphology by young Chinese ESL learners. In this study, 14–19-year-old students, who had studied English longer than the younger students in the study, had a significantly higher level of correct past marking in sentences *with* adverbials than in sentences *without* adverbials (Yang & Huang, 2004). Yang and Huang (2004) interpreted these findings as suggesting that sentences with temporal adverbials often aid higher-level students in remembering to use past tense morphology.

1.1. Research questions

This study investigated the following research questions:

- a) In what contexts do native Mandarin ESL students with a high level of knowledge of the simple past use the present perfect, past perfect and past progressive?
- b) What reasons do such native Mandarin ESL students have for their use of such forms?
- c) What are the associations between use of the simple past, present perfect, past perfect and past progressive and empirically assessed knowledge of English grammar?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

As shown in Table 1, there were 21 participants (15 female and 6 male) who took part in this study. Most of these participants were in a lower-intermediate or intermediate level full-time ESL class in a programme funded by the Federal Canadian Government. Their proficiency levels were determined by an English proficiency level assessment agency, which used the Canadian Language Benchmarks (<http://www.language.ca/home/>). The participants had a high level of knowledge of the simple past tense as exhibited by their mean score on a fill-in-the-gaps task ($M = 84.7\%$), which was designed to elicit the simple past (see next section for more information about this data elicitation device). In contrast to their knowledge of the simple past tense, they had an intermediate knowledge of English grammar overall as evidenced by their score on the grammar section of the Oxford Placement Test ($M = 53.1\%$) (see next section for more information about this data elicitation device). The participants were mostly in their thirties ($M = 35.7$ years) at the time this data was collected and had only lived in an English-speaking country (almost always Canada) for an average of 1.61 years.

Table 1. Participants

Backgroundvariable	Participantmean/frequency
Gender	15 F, 6 M = 21 participants
Accuracy with simple past tense on fill-in-the-gaps task	84.7% (12.8%)M (SD)
Grammar section of Oxford Placement Test (OPT)	53.1% (15.3%)
Age	35.7 years (7.1 years)
Age of arrival in an English-speaking country	34.2 years(7.2 years)
Length of residence in an English-speaking country	1.61 years(1.81 years)

2.2. Data collection and analysis

2.2.1. Grammar section of the Oxford placement test

This test was timed (50 minutes) according to the specifications of the test as described in Morell Moli (1999), which used the same version of the OPT used in this study to determine participant level

(see Appendix A). In the administration of the test, the participants were not allowed to use any exam aids, such as dictionaries. Each test item was marked as being either correct or incorrect.

2.2.2. Fill-in-the-gaps task

A fill-in-the-gaps task, in which participants supply the needed verb tense–aspect forms in blanks, is a common testing instrument in studies of knowledge of English past tense morphology (see Appendix B). This type of task has been used in studies targeting the English simple past tense (Collins, 2004) and the English present perfect (Uno, 2014). The task in this study was an untimed activity and no exam aids were allowed. For this task (please see the appendix for the complete activity), the participants were required to write the correct forms of verbs on a narrative about fictional past events. The first two paragraphs of the task are as shown below:

'I really 1. like (like) traveling. My friends often 2. _____ (ask) me why I enjoy traveling so much. I usually 3. _____ (tell) them that I 4. _____ (believe) that traveling to other countries is a good experience. I have visited many countries, but until last year I 5. _____ never _____ (be) to England. I 6. _____ (know) people in England who often ask me to visit them there.

Last year my brother was working in England, and he 7. _____ (tell) me he missed me very much. I 8. _____ (decide) to go there to visit him during my winter holidays. My brother often writes to me but I 9. _____ not _____ (see) him for several years. This way I could see my brother and also see England.'

Altogether, there were 43 items on the fill-in-the-gaps task which required the participants to fill in the correct form, most of which required a simple past tense, as this task was originally used in another study which investigated the use of the simple past tense. For the original study, the target items were for the use of the simple past tense. This testing instrument was trialled on a class of ESL participants, and it had a Cronbach's alpha reliability test of 0.788 for the simple past tense items. This arguably confirmed the reliability of the contexts in this task for the obligatory use of the simple past tense. This is relevant as other past tense–aspect forms were often oversupplied in contexts for the use of the simple past tense by the participants in this study.

For this study, the correct suppliance of the present perfect and past perfect on this task was investigated. Item 5, aforementioned, required the use of the past perfect, based on the validation of the task by native speakers of Canadian English. These native speakers were not able to unanimously agree as to which answer was correct for item 9. They chose either the past perfect or the present perfect for this item. Thus, item 9 was not investigated in terms of a 'correct answer'. In addition, the oversupplied uses of the present perfect, past perfect and past progressive were investigated as well. Forms which resembled the present/past perfect (e.g. – have went/had standed) were also investigated.

2.2.3. Verbal protocols

Verbal protocols have been used earlier as a research instrument in an attempt to elicit the metalinguistic processes of second language learners. Roehr (2004) used this technique in a study of the metalinguistic knowledge of foreign language students of German. Duff and Li (2002) used verbal protocols with English speakers studying Mandarin.

Immediately after the participants finished the fill-in-the-gaps task, the participants were asked to do a stimulated recall in their native language in order not to have their verbalisations constrained by their English level (although they were permitted to use English as well if they wished).

In addition, to facilitate participant comprehension of the task requirements, the researcher also gave the participants an example of a stimulated recall. The researcher sat behind the participants as they were engaged in this task. If the participants fell silent for more than a few moments, they were reminded to 'please keep talking'.

Afterwards, the participants' verbalisations related to the reasons for their choices for the target forms were translated from Mandarin into English by a native speaker of Mandarin, who has a university degree from an Anglophone university and who has a professional job in an English-speaking part of Canada.

A qualitative analysis of the participants' verbalisations was carried out to determine what kind of thoughts the participants appeared to have had while they supplied/oversupplied the present perfect, past perfect or past progressive (or present/past perfect-like forms). Coding categories were then devised for all relevant verbalisations about present/past perfect and past progressive forms (and present/past perfect-like forms).

3. Results

3.1. Fill-in-the-gaps task

As shown in Table 2, 7 of the 21 participants correctly used the past perfect in item 5 of the fill-in-the-gaps task. Ten of the participants incorrectly used the present perfect and 3 participants used a present perfect-like construction. The seven participants who used the past perfect correctly on this item had a mean Oxford Placement Grammar test of 65.9%, while the other 14 candidates who had the wrong answer had a mean score of 46.71% on this grammar proficiency assessment. This difference was statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Table 2. Differences of OPT scores between groups for correct and incorrect answers on item 5

Correct answer group	Incorrect answer group	Statistical significance of difference
M (SD)	M (SD)	
$n = 7$	$n = 14$	
65.9% (12.72%)	46.71% (11.49%)	$p = 0.0139$
		sig * $p < 0.05$
		$Z = -2.46$
		effect size $r = -0.55$
		(Mann-Whitney)

Item 9 was commonly completed with either the present perfect or the past perfect. Sixteen of the 21 participants correctly provided either the present perfect or the past perfect. One participant used a present perfect-like form (i.e. have saw) and the other four participants did not use either a present/past perfect or a present-perfect like form. As shown in Table 3, the group of 16 participants who answered item 9 with a present/past perfect form had a mean Oxford Placement Grammar Test score of 57.06%, while the group of 5 participants who did not use a present/past perfect form for this item had a mean OPT grammar score of 40.44%. This difference was statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Table 3. Differences of OPT scores between groups for correct and incorrect answers on item 9

Perfect verb form answer group	Non-perfect verb form answer group	Statistical significance of difference
M (SD)	M (SD)	
$n = 16$	$n = 5$	
57.06% (14.84%)	40.44% (4.94%)	$p = 0.0117$
		sig * $p < 0.05$
		$Z = 2.52$
		effect size $r = -0.56$
		(Mann-Whitney)

Differences of OPT Scores between groups for present/past perfect verb form and non-perfect verb form answers on item 9.

Thirteen out of the 21 participants oversupplied the present perfect, past perfect (or a perfect-like form) or past progressive on the fill-in-the-gaps task on the other items at least once on this task. Three of the top eight ranked participants oversupplied the past progressive, all in obligatory contexts for the use of the simple past tense. The eighth-ranked participant overused the past progressive seven times alone. Altogether there were ten tokens of an oversupplied past progressive form on this task. In terms of lexical aspect, seven of these ten tokens were activities, which is consistent with previous research that indicates that L2 learners are more likely to use progressive forms with activities than with other lexical aspects (Lee 2001; Tiittanen 2015).

There were 11 tokens of oversupplied present perfect forms and six tokens of oversupplied present perfect-like constructions (e.g. – have forgot) on this task, aside from those for item 5. The item with the most oversuppliances of the present perfect or a present perfect-like form was item 43 (i.e. _____ never _____ (forget), the correct answer for which was ‘will never forget’). This item had nine of the 17 oversupplied present perfect/present perfect-like forms. All of the other items only had one or two oversuppliance tokens.

There were seven tokens of oversupplied past perfect forms and four tokens of oversupplied past perfect-like constructions (e.g. – had forgot) on this task. Out of these 11 oversupplied forms, six were produced by the participant with the highest score (i.e. 79.6%) on the Oxford Placement Grammar Test. Altogether ten items were used with oversupplied forms. Eight of these ten items required the use of the simple past tense.

3.2. Verbal protocols

As shown in Table 4, 19 of the participants offered explanations in the think-aloud protocols for their use of a perfect form for item 5. Fourteen of these 19 participants mentioned the presence of an adverbial in the immediate environment of item 5 (i.e. ‘I have visited many countries, but until last year I 5. _____ never _____ (be) to England.’). The adverbials mentioned were ‘never’ and ‘last year’, almost always mentioned together with ‘until’. ‘Until last year’ (or some minor variation thereof) was mentioned as the most common reason for both the correct use of the past perfect as well as the incorrect use of the present perfect for this item. For example, the participant with the fourth-highest score on the OPT grammar test gave this reason for her choice of the past perfect: ‘I chose to use “had never been” uh because of the words “until last year”.’

There was one difference between some of the participants who used the past perfect and those who incorrectly used the present perfect. Only members of the former group made mention of some kind of sequence of events in the past necessitating the use of the past perfect. The participant with the second-highest score on the OPT grammar test gave a particularly elaborate explanation of this kind. She said:

something happened uh in the past and they have certain points. That means that last year is one point that happened in the last and then is a statement about something before that happened before. This has something about last year, so I used uh perfect tense, the past perfect tense. ‘I had never been to England’.

Only members of the group who incorrectly used the present perfect for item 5 mentioned the time adverb ‘never’ as a reason for their incorrect choice. For instance, the participant with the fifth-

highest score on the OPT said: 'I chose the present perfect tense because the word 'never' was used in this sentence. 'Never' is used with the present perfect tense.'

Table 4. Reasons for the use of a perfect form on item 5

Form used	Reasons given	Frequency of explanations by different participants
Correct use of the past perfect	until last year (adverbial)	4
	relationship between past events	3
Incorrect use of the present perfect	(until/before) last year (adverbial)	7
	never (adverbial)	3
	It's present perfect	1
	Present perfect used in previous sentence	1
	Total number of verbalisations	19

In order to analyse the possible role of adverbials further in the participants' reasoning on item 5, the verbalisations were categorised as being either 'adverbial' in nature or 'something else'. A one-sample chi-square goodness of fit calculation was carried out on this binary categorisation. The chi-square test result was 3.36 ($df = 1, p = 0.067$ ns). Although the 0.05 threshold for statistical significance was not met, the difference between the speakers' use of adverbials and other reasons did approach statistical significance.

As shown in Table 5, out of the 17 participants who supplied the present perfect or the past perfect tense (including one who used a present perfect-like form) on item 9, 13 participants gave an adverbial as their reason for their choice. The sentential context for item 9 was: 'my brother often writes to me but I 9. _____ not _____ (see) him for several years'. Eleven of these 13 participants listed the presence of the adverbial phrase, 'for several years' or some slight variant of this phrase, as the reason for their choice for the verb form. For example, the participant with the third-highest score on the OPT grammar test gave this reason for her choice: 'because of "several years", I chose the present perfect tense'.

Table 5. Reasons for the use of the present/past perfect on item # 9

Reasons given	Frequency of explanations by different participants
(For) several/a few/many years (adverbial)	11
For a long time (adverbial)	1
Until last year (adverbial)	1
For	1
Verb in previous clause in simple present tense	1
No explanation given	2
Total verbalisations	17

The possible role of adverbials in reasoning for item 9 was analysed further by grouping the verbalisations in Table 4 into a binary categorical distinction – 'adverbial' or 'something else'. A one-sample chi-square test was then calculated on this binary classification. The chi-square goodness of fit test was statistically significant at the $*p < 0.05$ level, indicating that more adverbial reasons were given than all of the other explanations grouped together. The chi-square value was 4.765 ($df = 1; p = 0.029$).

Table 6 shows the reasons given for the oversuppliance of the past progressive on the fill-in-the-gaps task. The most frequent verbalisation made on the verbal protocols made was something to the effect that action expressed continued over a long period. This was expressed via different expressions, such as 'the action taking quite a while,' 'not just uh short time' etc. For example, the participant with the second rank on the OPT grammar test made the following statement with respect to item 23, given in context below, on the fill-in-gap test: 'Before my flight, I had to find something to

do, so I 23. _____ (watch) TV in a bar at the airport.’ This participant said (in English): ‘if I using past tense, I think should be find, but it’s more like the action taking quite a while.’

Table 6. Reasons for oversuppliance of past progressive on items 23, 24, 27, 38, 39 and 42

Reasons given	Frequency of explanations by participants
Long period	3
Expressed confusion between simple past and the past continuous	1
Activity continuing in the past	1
Usually in the continuous form; everything in the paragraph is in the past	1
Total verbalisations	6

As shown in Table 7, unlike the participants’ verbal protocol explanations for their choice of perfect forms for items 5 and 9, for which there was some consistency in their explanations, there were a lot of different reasons offered for their oversuppliance of the present perfect. In Table 8, the most common reasons for these oversuppliances involved something to do either with the past tense or a past action (4 out of 7 items).

Table 7. Reasons for the oversuppliance of the present perfect and present perfect-like constructions on items 12, 16, 20 and 26

Reasons given	Frequency of explanations by participants
Chose past tense (apparent mix-up between present perfect and past time)	2
subjunctive	2
A past tense in the main sentence	1
Happened before another action – past perfect(apparent mix-up between past perfect and present perfect)	1
It was assumed.	1
Total verbalisations	7

As shown in Table 8, as with the oversuppliance of the present perfect and present perfect-like forms, there were a variety of reasons for the oversuppliance of the past perfect (or past perfect-like forms). Nevertheless, there were some commonalities in their reasons. Out of the 7 explanations for the 7 oversupplied past perfect forms, 5 of the participants’ verbalisations either implicitly (i.e. happened before another event) or explicitly referred to the past.

Table 8. Reasons for the oversuppliance of the past perfect and past perfect-like constructions on items 18, 30, 34, 35, 36 and 37

Reasons given	Frequency of explanations by participants
Happened before another event/('before' is present)implicit/explicit reference to past	2
Neighbouringsentence has a past tenseimplicit/explicit reference to past	2
Past of some timeimplicit/explicit reference to past	1
Subjunctive	1
I’m not sure	1
Total verbalisations	7

In order to further analyse the possible role of an implicit/explicit reference to the past versus all other reasons given for the oversuppliance of the past perfect (and past perfect-like constructions), the data in Table 8 were classified as being either an ‘implicit/explicit reference to the past’ or ‘something else’. A one-sample goodness of fit chi-square test produced statistically non-significant results with a chi-square value of 1.286 ($df = 1; p = 0.257$).

In order to determine whether there were any correlations between the participants' overall grammatical knowledge, as evinced by their performance on the OPT grammar test, and their use of the past perfect, past perfect and past progressive, Spearman's Rho was calculated. This calculation was conducted on their correct use of the past perfect on item 5 on the fill-in-the-gaps task, the only item for which only the past perfect was possible as a correct answer. In addition, the participants' oversuppliance of the past perfect, present perfect and past progressive was correlated with their OPT grammar scores as well.

As shown in Table 9, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between the participants' OPT grammar score and correct use of the past perfect on item 5. The participants who used the past perfect correctly on this item tended to have higher scores on the OPT than those who did not use the past perfect correctly. However, there was no significant correlation between the participants' OPT grammar score and their oversuppliance of the past perfect on items 18, 30, 34, 35, 36 and 37. The oversuppliance of the present perfect on items 12, 16, 29, 26 and 31 were not significantly correlated with the participants' score on the OPT grammar test. The participants who oversupplied the past progressive on items 23, 24, 27, 38, 39 and 42 tended to have higher scores on their OPT scores. There was a statistically significant positive correlation between OPT score and oversuppliance of the past progressive on these items.

Table 9. Correlation between OPT grammar score + use of the past perfect, present perfect and past progressive

Correct use of past perfect (item 5)	Oversuppliance of past perfect (items 18, 30, 34, 35, 36, 37)	Oversuppliance of present perfect (items 12, 16, 20, 26, 31)	Oversuppliance of past progressive (items 23, 24, 27, 38, 39, 42)
$R = 0.56049$	$R = 0.12846$	$R = 0.08655$	$R = 0.47915$
$p = 0.00822$	$p = 0.57895$	$p = 0.70911$	$p = 0.02797$
sig at $**p < 0.01$	n.s.	n.s.	sig at $*p < 0.05$
(Spearman's Rho)	(Spearman's Rho)	(Spearman's Rho)	(Spearman's Rho)

In summary, the participants sometimes correctly supplied the past perfect, the one item on the fill-in-the-gap in which it was obligatory. The participants who had a higher score on their OPT grammar test were particularly likely to correctly use the past perfect correctly. The participants also frequently overused the present perfect and past perfect. The past progressive was oversupplied by three participants in obligatory contexts for the simple past tense. These participants tended to have higher scores on their OPT grammar test. Most of the oversuppliances of the past progressive were activities in terms of their lexical aspect. All three of these verb tense–aspect forms were usually oversupplied in contexts requiring the use of the simple past tense.

The verbal protocols revealed that the participants most frequently used the presence of an adverbial in the sentential context of item 9 as their primary reason for their use of the present perfect or past perfect. Their reasons for the use of a perfect form on item 5 also often had to do with the presence of adverbials, although it must be noted that this did not quite reach statistical significance. There was a great deal of variation in the participants' reasons for their oversuppliances of the present perfect, past progressive and past perfect.

4. Discussion

The results may have been influenced by developmental factors common to ESL learners, but there could also have been some L1 influence from Mandarin. The results appear to support the notion that the past progressive, present perfect and the past perfect emerge primarily amongst learners with a higher level of grammatical proficiency, as measured by the Oxford Grammar Placement Test. This is somewhat consistent with previous research (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000), which revealed that certain past

tense–aspect forms appear to be necessary for the appearance of other past tense–aspect forms. These results, although exploratory, may also lend support to the notion that the overall higher grammatical proficiency is a helpful precondition for some use of the past progressive, present perfect and past perfect.

One of the most striking aspects of this research was the apparent influence of the adverbials in the participants' choice of present perfect and past perfect forms. This apparent result is similar to what Uno (2014) found. In Uno's study, the participants were required to write in verb tense–aspect forms on a fill-in-the-gaps task. Uno's results indicated that the participants used the present perfect more frequently in contexts with a durative adverb than in contexts without a durative adverb.

The results of this study are also reminiscent of Yang and Huang's (2004) research. As noted earlier, Yang and Huang postulated that the higher-level participants in their study used the adverbials as a reminder to use the simple past tense in their writing. Yang and Huang asserted that this demonstrates L1 influence due to the greater importance of adverbials in Chinese in past temporal expression compared to English. Mandarin does not have any verb tense morphology (Smith & Erbaugh, 2005). Aspect and tense are expressed, amongst other factors, via adverbs and aspect markers (Smith & Erbaugh, 2005; Tiede & Lance, 1986).

However, the adverbials in this study may possibly also have influenced the participants' choice of verb tense–aspect morphology because of their developmental level. As Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds' (1995) research reveals, some learners appear to equate adverbs of frequency as establishing the context for the use of the simple present tense, regardless of other contextual clues. The learners in this study most frequently used the presence of the adverbials phrases 'until last year' and 'for several years' as their rationale for the choice of a perfect form. In addition, the presence of the time adverb 'never' was given as a reason for their oversuppliance of the present perfect. The participants may possibly have established a strong connection between these adverbials and the use of a perfect form. The oversuppliance of the present perfect, past perfect and past progressive by the learners in sentential contexts requiring the simple past tense, should not be regarded as being surprising. L2 learners sometimes oversupply grammatical forms in contexts which are not licensed by native speakers (Seog, 2015). The oversuppliance of verb forms, in particular, in inappropriate contexts has been found to be a common phenomenon amongst adult second language learners in that form tends to precede function (Perdue, 1993, Vol. II). More specifically, these results are consistent with previous research revealing that ESL participants are confused between semantically similar past tense morphology (Bardovi-Harlig, 1997). The fact that the participants sometimes mixed up the past perfect, past perfect and past progressive is also consistent with the notion of linguistic complexity (Bulte & Housen, 2012; Pallotti, 2015). The participants may have been confused by competing verb tense–aspect forms for past time reference.

Some of the participants appeared to show some confusion between the present perfect and past perfect. The proficiency level of the participants appeared to have played a role in understanding the difference between the present perfect and past perfect. On item 5, which required the past perfect, the participants who correctly supplied the past perfect had a higher overall level of grammatical proficiency than those participants who mostly incorrectly supplied the present perfect for this item. In addition, only participants who correctly used the past perfect on item 5 made mention of a sequence of past events as their reason for their choice of the past perfect. In contrast to the participants who correctly used the past perfect on item 5, the participants who incorrectly supplied the present perfect on item 5 never made mention of a sequence of actions in the past. This difference in verbalisations may possibly suggest that those participants who got the right answer had at least some notion of the past perfect as a relative past tense. It is possible that many of the participants who incorrectly supplied the present perfect for this item did not have awareness of this temporal relation for at least this item. Thus, one interpretation of the higher participants' verbalisations of their correct choice of the past perfect is that they may possibly have had some understanding of the role of time reference in the use of the past perfect. In the use of the past perfect, there is a later past reference

point for the event marked with the past perfect. Another factor in the confusion in use between the present perfect and past perfect may simply be the fact that they look very similar (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). The past perfect uses 'had' as the auxiliary, while the present perfect uses 'have/has'.

The participants' verbalisations related to their use of the present perfect (i.e. 'never', 'for several years') may possibly show some implicit understanding that the present perfect is used in situations in which the prior past action has a present reference point. That is, an event which has *never* taken place refers to a relationship between the past and present time. Similarly, an action which has gone on *for several years* continues until the present time.

The confusion between the present perfect, past perfect and the simple past may possibly be partially the result of the participants not always, at least implicitly, understanding the time reference point of these different aspect-tense forms within the linguistic contexts of the fill-in-the-gaps task. Many of the participants may frequently have been driven by a more surface analysis of the linguistic context, i.e. the presence of an adverbial within the sentential context of the item rather than a deeper understanding of the differences between these verb forms. This may have been influenced by the developmental level of the participants as research indicates that the use of adverbials precedes the accurate use of tense–aspect morphology (Perdue, 1993, Vo. II). As such, as suggested by the work of Yang and Huang (2004), time adverbials may serve to 'bootstrap' learners in their acquisition of tense–aspect morphology. However, time adverbials may also serve as incorrect cues for some learners.

Although the participants often failed to correctly understand the differences between the present perfect, past perfect and simple past, their suppliance of the present perfect and past perfect on the fill-in-the-gaps task could possibly show that they had mostly acquired the central meaning of the perfect tenses, namely that of pastness (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Learners may possibly learn the central meanings of tense–aspect forms before the more nuanced meanings, similar to how lexical aspect influences learners to learn the most prototypical uses of verb tense–aspect forms before non-prototypical uses (Li & Shirai, 2000).

The oversuppliance of the past progressive in this study is consistent with previous research on the use of this verb tense by ESL learners, which shows that some learners are more likely to oversupply the form than others (Dose-Heidelmayer & Goetz, 2016). In the study at hand, one participant supplied the great majority of the incorrect uses of the past progressive. In addition, the verbalisations for the oversuppliance of the past progressive could possibly support the notion that the participants were guided by a prototypical use of the progressive – that is the use of the progressive for verbs which are activities in terms of their lexical aspect. This finding is consistent with previous studies which show that L2 learners are strongly influenced by prototypical uses of tense–aspect morphology (Salaberry, 2011).

Moreover, the fact that all of the oversuppliances were in the contexts of the simple past tense is consistent with the interpretation that these participants could not distinguish the use of the simple past tense from the past progressive, at least within these items. In fact, one participant said exactly this within one of her verbalisations, explaining (in English) her confusion between the past progressive and the simple past:

'At the coffee shop, I uh, I was studying my university textbook.' At this point I, I feel little confused because I thinking past tense or past continuing tense. Mm at the Coffee Time, I can say 'I studied my university textbook' but the problem is uh the text is maybe a lot. If I say 'I studied', it feels like I finished the whole book or it feels like uh uh I really uh stayed a long time there and the main purpose is for studying the textbook.

The oversuppliance of the past progressive may also have exhibited some L1 influence in that the Mandarin imperfective marker, *zhe*, serves mainly as a marker of durativeness (Xiao & McEnery, 2004). Comments about the long duration of an action were the most common type of explanation given for its use. This interpretation is in keeping with adult L2 studies which have shown L1 influence in the use of L2 grammatical aspect (Duff & Li, 2002; Kellerman, 1995).

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that Mandarin-speaking ESL students, with a high knowledge of the simple past tense and of an overall intermediate grammatical level of knowledge, had some ability to correctly use the past perfect. This was particularly true of the participants with higher overall levels of grammatical knowledge. These participants sometimes used adverbials as their reason for their correct choice of the past perfect. It is possible that the presence of adverbials within the sentential context was a common reason for their oversuppliance of the past perfect and present perfect as well. It is also possible that the past progressive may have been oversupplied due to its lexical aspect (i.e. activities). The perceived long duration of the action expressed within sentences with the past progressive could possibly have played a role in the results. In addition, many of the participants mixed up the past perfect with the present perfect and the simple past tense. A few of the participants also mixed up the past progressive with the simple past.

Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that this is only an exploratory study. The fill-in-the-gaps task was created to induce the use of the simple past tense. There was only one context for the obligatory use of the past perfect, and none for the present perfect or past progressive. In addition, the size of the participant group (i.e. 21) was extremely small and the group had a somewhat heterogeneous level of overall grammatical knowledge. Thus, these findings must be regarded as being extremely tentative. Hopefully, further research with a larger participant group may be conducted with a data elicitation task that targets the present perfect, past perfect and past progressive.

6. Recommendations

Regardless of the exploratory nature of this study, these results may have some relevance for ESL/EFL teachers, particularly those with Mandarin-speaking learners in their classroom at an intermediate level of grammatical knowledge who have a good understanding of the simple past tense. ESL/EFL teachers may find it useful to point out to their students that the present perfect and past perfect are frequently used in sentential contexts with adverbials, such as 'never', 'for a long time' etc. However, they should make it clear that such adverbials are not a sufficient reason for the choice of either the present perfect or the past perfect. In addition, ESL/EFL teachers may find it useful to point out the differences in use between the past perfect and the present perfect as well as the simple past. ESL/EFL teachers may also find it useful to help students to recognise the differences in use between the past progressive and the simple past. Using activities (in terms of the lexical aspect) as examples of this form may perhaps help some learners develop some understanding of the prototypical use of the past progressive. However, when learners are developmentally ready, it may be helpful to use examples with the past progressive which are not activities, and which do not persist for a longer duration, and to point this out to their students in a manner comprehensible to them.

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Appendix A.OPT grammar test (babelfish.hu/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/grammar.rtf)

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Oxford Placement Test 1

Grammar Test PART 1

Name _____	
Total Listening _____ / 100	Total Grammar Part 2 _____ / 50
Total Grammar Part 1 _____ / 50	Grand total _____ / 200

Look at these examples. The correct answer is ticked.

- a In warm climates people like likes are liking sitting outside in the sun.
- b If it is very hot, they sit at under the shade.

Now the test will begin. Tick the correct answers.

- 1 Water is to boil is boiling boils at a temperature of 100°C.
- 2 In some countries there is is it is very hot all the time.
- 3 In cold countries people wear thick clothes for keeping to keep for to keep warm.
- 4 In England people are always talking about a weather the weather weather.
- 5 In some places it rains there rains it raining almost every day.
- 6 In deserts there isn't the some any grass.
- 7 Places near the Equator have a warm the warm warm weather even in the cold season.
- 8 In England coldest the coldest colder time of year is usually from December to February.
- 9 The most Most of Most people don't know what it's like in other countries.
- 10 Very less little few people can travel abroad.
- 11 Mohammed Ali has won won is winning his first world title fight in 1960.
- 12 After he had won have won was winning an Olympic gold medal he became a professional boxer.
- 13 His religious beliefs have made him made him to made him change his name when he became champion.
- 14 If he has would have had lost his first fight with Sonny Liston, no one would have been surprised.
- 15 He has travelled a lot both and or as a boxer and as a world-famous personality.

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____
- 7 _____
- 8 _____
- 9 _____
- 10 _____
- 11 _____
- 12 _____
- 13 _____
- 14 _____
- 15 _____

subtotal ____/15

Oxford Placement Test 1 Grammar Test Part 1		Page 2
16	He is very well known all in all over in all the world.	16
17	Many people is believing are believing believe he was the greatest boxer of all time.	17
18	To be the best from in of the world is not easy.	18
19	Like any top sportsman Ali had to must should train very hard.	19
20	Even though he has now lost his title, people would will did always remember him as a champion.	20
	The history of aeroplane the aeroplane an aeroplane is	21
	quite a a quite quite short one. For many centuries men	22
	are trying try had tried to fly, but with	23
	little few a little success. In the 19th century a few people	24
	succeeded to fly in flying into flying in balloons. But it wasn't until	25
	the beginning of this next that century that anybody	26
	were is was able to fly in a machine	27
	who which what was heavier than air, in other words, in	28
	who which what we now call a 'plane'. The first people to achieve	29
	'powered flight' were the Wright brothers. His Their Theirs	30
	was the machine which was the forerunner of the Jumbo jets	
	and supersonic airliners that are such such a so common	31
	sight today. They could should couldn't hardly have imagined that in 1969,	32
	not much not many no much more than half a century later,	33
	a man will be had been would be landed on the moon.	34
	Already a man man the man is taking the first steps towards the stars.	35
	Although space satellites have existed since during for less	36
	than forty years, we are now dependent from of on them for all	37
	kinds of informations information an information . Not only	38
	are they they are there are being used for scientific research in	39
	space, but also to see what kind of weather is coming comes coming .	40
	By 1998 there would must will have been satellites in space for forty	41
	years and the 'space superpowers' are planning to have make let	42
	massive space stations built. When these will be are will have been	43
	completed it will be the first time when where that astronauts will be	44
	able to work in space in large numbers. Apart For Except all that,	45
	in many ways the most remarkable flight of above at all was	46
	it that that one of the flying bicycle, which the world saw on television,	47
	flying to fly fly across the Channel from England to France, with nothing	48
	apart but than a man to power it. As the bicycle-flyer said,	49
	'It's the first time I realize I've realized I am realizing what hard work it is to be a bird!'	50
	subtotal /35	

Grammar Test PART 2

51 Many teachers say to say tell their students should learn a foreign language.	51
52 Learning a second language is not the same as like than learning a first language.	52
53 It takes long time long a long time to learn any language.	53
54 It is said that Chinese is perhaps the world's harder hardest more hard language to master.	54
55 English is quite difficult because of all the exceptions who which what have to be learnt.	55
56 You can learn the basic structures of a language quite quickly, but only if you are wanting will to are willing to make an effort.	56
57 A lot of people aren't used to the study to study to studying grammar in their own language.	57
58 Many adult students of English wish they would start would have started had started their language studies earlier.	58
59 In some countries students have to spend a lot of time working on by in their own.	59
60 There aren't no any some easy ways of learning a foreign language in your own country.	60
61 Some people try to improve their English by hearing listening listening to the BBC World Service.	61
62 Live Life Living with a foreign family can be a good way to learn a language.	62
63 It's no use to try trying in trying to learn a language just by studying a dictionary.	63
64 Many students of English would rather not would rather prefer not would rather not to take tests.	64
65 Some people think it's time we all learn should learn learnt a single international language.	65
Charles Walker is a teacher at a comprehensive school in Norwich. He has joined joined joins the staff of the school in 1988 and has been working worked works there ever since.	66
Before move to move moving to Norwich, he taught in Italy and in Wales.	67
and before that he has been was was being a student at Cambridge University. So far he isn't wasn't hasn't been in Norwich for as long as he was in Wales, but he likes the city a lot and should would could like to stay there for at least another two years, or, how which as he puts it, until his two children have will have will be grown up a bit.	68
He met his wife, Kate, in 1982 while he was to live was living had been living abroad for a while, and they got married in 1986.	69
Their two children, Mark and Susan, are were have been both born in Norwich.	70
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	73
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	75

subtotal /25

The Walkers' boy, who which he is four, has just started at nursery school, but his their her sister shall stay stays will be staying at home for another couple of years, because she is nearly two years younger more young the younger than him. Charles and Kate Walker are used use used to live in the country, but now that they have children, they have moved move moved into the city. Charles wanted a house next near close the school in order for to get to work easily. Unfortunately the a that one the two of them really wanted was too expensive, so they must should had to buy one a bit further away. By the time the children go will go will have gone to secondary school, that which what Charles and Kate hope will be in Norwich, the Walkers will have been have been will be living there for at least fifteen years. They can't be sure if they stay do stay will stay, but if they don't didn't won't, their friends won't be too surprised.

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Look at the following examples of question tags in English. The correct form of the tag is ticked.

- a He's getting the 9.15 train, is he hasn't he wasn't he ?
- b She works in a library, isn't she does she doesn't he ?
- c Tom didn't tell you, hasn't he didn't he did he ?
- d Someone's forgotten to switch off the gas, didn't one didn't they have they ?

Now tick the correct question tag in the following 10 items:

- 91 John's coming to see you, hasn't he wasn't he isn't he ?
- 92 It's been a long time since you've seen him, hasn't it isn't it haven't you ?
- 93 He's due to arrive tomorrow, won't he isn't he will he ?
- 94 He won't be getting in till about 10.30, isn't he is he will he ?
- 95 You met him while you were on holiday, didn't you weren't you haven't you ?
- 96 I think I'm expected to pick him up, aren't I don't I are you ?
- 97 No doubt you'd rather he stayed in England now, didn't you wouldn't you shouldn't you ?
- 98 Nobody else has been told he's coming, is he has he have they ?
- 99 We'd better not stay up too late tonight, didn't we have we had we ?
- 100 I suppose it's time we called it a day, didn't we isn't it don't I ?

subtotal /25

Appendix B. Fill-in-the-gaps task

Please fill in the correct forms of the verbs in the blanks below:

I really 1. like (like) traveling. My friends often 2. _____ (ask) me why I enjoy traveling so much. I usually 3. _____ (tell) them that I 4. _____ (believe) that traveling to other countries is a good experience. I have visited many countries, but until last year I 5. _____ never _____ (be) to England. I 6. _____ (know) people in England who often ask me to visit them there.

Last year my brother was working in England, and he 7. _____ (tell) me he missed me very much. I 8. _____ (decide) to go there to visit him during my winter holidays. My brother often writes to me but I 9. _____ not _____ (see) him for several years. This way I could see my brother and also see England.

My brother was in London at that time, so I 10. _____ (call) the travel agency where my friend worked to buy a ticket to London on the date I preferred (July 2). The travel agency did not have any more flights to London on July 2, so I went to look on the internet. On the internet I could not find any more flights on that date, but I 11. _____ (continue) looking for some time. I still couldn't find any flights with available seats on that date, so I 12. _____ (choose) a flight on July 3 instead. I 13. _____ (see) that Air Canada offered the best price. Because Air Canada offered the best price, I purchased a ticket with them. However, I was a little worried because I 14. _____ (need) to pay with my credit card and I am generally worried about the security of my credit card number. But I 15. _____ (buy) a ticket on this flight because I 16. _____ (know) I could not afford anything more expensive.

On the day of the flight, my friend 17. _____ (drive) me to the airport. I 18. _____ (get) to the airport early. The first thing I did at the airport was I went to the Air Canada desk. At the Air Canada desk, the Air Canada employee 19. _____ (ask) to see my electronic ticket. Unfortunately, I had lost my ticket. I was really worried that I would 20. _____ (miss) my flight. However, I was worried for nothing. I 21. _____ (show) the Air Canada employee my passport. Then he 22. _____ (give) me another ticket.

Before my flight, I had to find something to do, so I 23. _____ (watch) TV in a bar at the airport. I also 24. _____ (play) some video games and 25. _____ (write) in my diary. I was also a little bit hungry, so I 26. _____ (eat) in a coffee shop. At the coffee shop, I 27. _____ (study) my university textbook. An hour and a half before my flight, I 28. _____ (walk) to the security gate. At the security gate, I 29. _____ (stand) in line for a long time. When it was finally my turn, I handed the security guard my ticket. He examined it very carefully. I 30. _____ (feel) nervous because I didn't know why he was looking at it like that. Finally, he said in a loud voice, 'The date for this ticket 31. _____ (be) wrong!' He 32. _____ (look) angry. I 33. _____ (start) to talk, but before I could finish my sentence, he 34. _____ (stop) me at once by saying 'Oh, I'm sorry! I made a mistake! I 35. _____ (think) it was Saturday.' I was really angry! I was going to make a complaint about him, but I didn't because I just 36. _____ (want) to go to the gate that my flight was leaving from. So, after going through the security gate, I just 37. _____ (find) the gate that my flight was leaving from. While I was waiting there, I talked to one of the other passengers waiting there. He was from France, so I 38. _____ (speak) French with him to practice my French.

The flight was mostly OK, but as the first movie was ending, the plane began to shake up and down, and one of the passenger's bags 39. _____ (fall) down. All this caused me 40. _____ (feel) scared.

When the flight finally 41. _____ (arrive) in London, I was so happy. I can't honestly say that I 42. _____ (enjoy) this flight. When the plane was finally on the ground, I said to myself 'I 43. _____ never _____ (forget) this trip!'