

Aspectual contrasts in the English present tense revisited

Exploring the role of input and L1 influence

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This study investigates the acquisition of aspectual contrasts in the English present tense by French and Chinese learners of English at upper-intermediate to advanced proficiency levels. An oral production task and an interpretation task show that the expression of the aspectual present tense does not always have to constitute an insurmountable barrier to learners of English, at least for the upper-intermediate and advanced proficiency levels tested in this study. This successful acquisition is in spite of the differences in L1/L2 feature expressions and the unexpected variability in the input. Our research highlights that teachers must be aware of the one-sided variability of the native speaker usage (i.e. that the present simple form can express multiple meanings, while the present progressive is associated with one meaning only) if they want to improve performance and comprehension at lower proficiency levels.

Keywords: aspect, feature reassembly, L1 influence, French, English, Chinese, input

1. Introduction

Acquiring grammatical aspect has been shown to be particularly problematic for second language (L2) learners whose first language (L1) does not fully grammaticalize aspectual contrasts (Domínguez, Arche, & Myles, 2017; Montrul & Slabakova, 2003; Slabakova, 2003). However, the vast majority of this research has focused almost exclusively on aspectual contrasts in the past tense, with only a handful of studies exploring aspectual distinctions in the present tense (Ayoun, 2015; Salaberry, Comajoan, & González, 2013). The existing studies provide evidence to suggest that the acquisition of aspectual contrasts only constitutes a

source of residual difficulty at advanced stages of proficiency for certain learner groups. For example, some studies show that certain L1 groups do not experience persistent difficulties with aspectual contrasts in the English present tense (Slabakova, 2003 for Bulgarian; Gabriele & Canales, 2011 for Spanish and Japanese; Hawkins et al., 2008 for verb-raising languages; Al-Thubaiti, 2015 for Arabic), whereas other studies suggest otherwise (Hawkins et al., 2008 for Chinese and Japanese; Liszka, 2009, 2015 for French). The role of L1 transfer, therefore, appears to play a deterministic role in the L2 acquisition of aspectual morphosyntax. Nevertheless, few studies, with the exception of Gabriele and Canales (2011) and Hawkins et al. (2008), have directly compared L2 learners from more than one L1 background. The present study provides such a comparison.

Another largely underexplored area in this field is the influence of the L2 input. Limited research has directly considered the role the input plays in the L2 acquisition of aspectual morphosyntax, with most researchers focusing predominately on prototypical interpretations. Our research, however, suggests that the input of the aspectual tense forms (i.e. the morphological verb endings) with aspectual meanings may not be as clear-cut as had previously been imagined.

The primary aim of this study, then, is to examine the potential role of both the input and the first language in relation to the second language development of aspectual contrasts in the English present tense by L2 learners from two different L1 backgrounds: Chinese and French. Such a context provides a rich testing ground for exploring the acquisitional difficulties relating to syntax-semantic mismatches. A secondary aim of this study is to explore the broader pedagogical implications of such research in order to help language educators develop a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to and/or inhibiting ultimate attainment among second language learners.

In this paper, we present data from an aspectual interpretation task and an oral production task and discuss the implications this research has for second language development and modern language pedagogy. The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we explore how grammatical aspect is expressed in English, focusing specifically on the present tense. Section 3 presents the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis. Section 4 describes the L2 acquisition task within a Feature Reassembly framework. Section 5 provides a selective overview of previous L2 studies on aspectual morphology in the present tense. Section 6 presents the research questions and predictions. Section 7 describes the method of the current study and presents the results. Sections 8 and 9 discuss the implications of these results for theories of language development and language pedagogy, respectively.

2. Encoding of aspect

2.1 Prototypical meanings

The present study focuses on the obligatory aspectual distinction between progressive and habitual aspect in the English present tense, as grammaticalized by the progressive and simple forms, respectively. The primary function of the Present Simple (i.e. the simple verb pattern, V-s) in (1) is to express a habitual or generic interpretation of the eventuality, ‘to work at home’, that is, to describe the eventuality as occurring more than once over a period of time. The complex verb pattern in (2), consisting of the auxiliary verb *to be* and the participle *V-ing*, gives rise to a progressive situational interpretation of the same eventuality. The sentences introduced by # are thought to be inappropriate with the provided adverbial modification.

- (1) She works at home on Mondays.
#She is working at home on Mondays.
- (2) She is working at home (right now).
#She works at home (right now).

Numerous theories have been advanced to account for the contrast between these aspectual forms. For the purpose of this article, we follow Arche’s (2014) analysis and assume that the syntactic structure underlying the aforementioned semantic interpretations are universal across languages, but that the locus of variation lies in how these semantic interpretations are expressed morphosyntactically, through the verb tense endings. In other words, these aspectual meanings result from the same syntactic features, regardless of the language in question, but the interpretations are mapped onto different surface morphology across languages. For example, English uses the complex verb pattern, ‘be V-ing’, to express progressive aspect, whereas Chinese uses the progressive marker, ‘zai’. Although these two forms may impose *specific* semantic selection constraints and use *distinct* surface forms, the underlying semantic interpretation remains *constant* across languages. The interested reader is encouraged to consult Arche (2014) for a more in-depth discussion of this analysis.

However, the meanings discussed in this section only constitute the prototypical interpretations of the two forms. To cite just one example, the Present Simple can express several meanings, including the reportive interpretation. In the following section, we discuss this meaning in more depth.

2.2 Reportive present

Most L2 studies to date have typically focused on the prototypical interpretations of the simple and progressive forms. The current study aims to extend the scope of this research by focusing on the non-prototypical reportive interpretation of the Present Simple. In highly-marked contexts, such as sportscaster-style broadcasts and (oral) narratives, the progressive and simple forms can be used interchangeably to describe an event or a series of events that *appear* to be more or less concomitant to the utterance time, such that the simple form overlaps in functional-semantic scope with the progressive form (Vraciu, 2015; Williams, 2002). For example, in (3), a sports reporter (i.e. the speaker) uses the Present Simple to provide a narrative, by reporting in real time a series of events that seem to be occurring more or less at the same time as the utterance.

- (3) “He hits it into the hole. Jeter makes a nice stop. He fires to first, and gets him by a step.” (Langacker, 2011: 60)

However, the reality of the situation is that the described events are already complete by the time the speaker delivers the utterance. It has thus been argued that the reportive interpretation carries a perfective aspectual value (DeWit, Patard, & Brisard, 2013; Langacker, 2011); that is, it expresses a complete event. Note that in this paper, we use the reportive interpretation and perfective aspect interchangeably to refer to the same meaning.

3. Feature Reassembly Hypothesis

Over the past twenty years, numerous theories have been proposed to account for differences in the ultimate attainment of morphosyntax between L1 and L2 speakers. A leading theory in this field is the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH, Lardiere, 2009). The FRH states that the initial L2 grammar consists of “an entrenched system of morphosyntactic features already assembled into lexical items” (Hwang & Lardiere, 2013: 58). Here, morphosyntactic (or formal) features refer to “formal properties of syntactic objects which determine how they behave with respect to syntactic constraints and operations” (Svenonius, 2019: 1).

In order to acquire a target-like L2 grammar, L2 speakers must engage in a two-level process of feature remapping and reassembly. Feature remapping involves L2 learners undertaking a contrastive analysis between the L1 and L2 formal features in order to map the L1 morphosyntactic forms onto the L2 equivalents, either correctly or incorrectly. In the event of L1–L2 mismatches, L2 learners are required to reassemble the existing L1 feature bundles into new L2 feature-

specific configurations and lexical items (Hwang & Lardiere, 2013). Linguistic properties requiring high levels of feature reassembly are thus predicted to be most problematic for L2 learners.

The scope of the FRH, at least in its original formulation, was initially restricted to formal features of the grammar. However, since its initial conception, many researchers have successfully extended its scope to additionally include semantic features.¹ Numerous experimental studies have provided evidence in support of this proposal (Cho & Slabakova, 2014; Domínguez et al., 2017; Gil & Marsden, 2013; Guijarro-Fuentes, 2012; Hwang & Lardiere, 2013).

An interesting extension, so to speak, of the FRH is Slabakova and colleagues’ proposal regarding the difficulty of overtly and covertly expressed formal features (Cho & Slabakova, 2014; Slabakova, 2009). Overtly expressed features involve dedicated functional morphology (e.g. the mapping of [progressive] onto *-ing* in English), whereas the properties of covertly expressed features are typically inferred from the context, and in some cases using periphrastic expressions (e.g. the past tense in Chinese, which is expressed using adverbial expressions such as *yesterday, last week*) (Cho & Slabakova, 2014: 164). Slabakova and colleagues predict that covertly expressed features will be more challenging for the L2 learners, on the basis of inconsistent input, compared to features with a one-to-one form-to-meaning mapping, and that the degree of difficulty operates on a spectrum, as schematised in Figure 1 below. F_{morpheme} refers to an overtly expressed formal feature (i.e. marked with dedicated functional morphology), whereas F_{context} refers to a functional feature of which the properties are inferred from the context (i.e. via discourse – pragmatics).

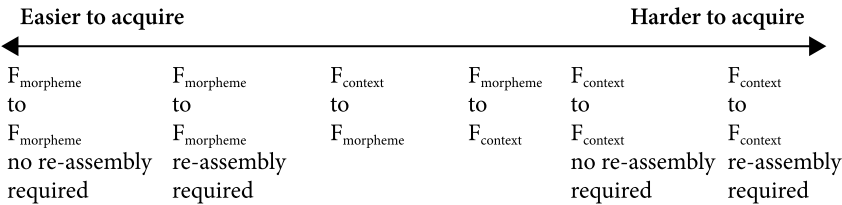


Figure 1. Cline of difficulty in functional feature acquisition in various learning situations (Slabakova, 2009; Cho & Slabakova, 2014: 166)

1. Semantic features refer to “grammatical meaning encoded by languages of the world” (Alexiadou, Haegeman, & Stavrou, 2007: 56; Lyons, 1999).

4. Present aspectual meanings in French and Chinese

The current study examines the possible effects of transfer from the L1 grammar, in this case, French and Chinese. Before we explore these effects any further, we must first understand how the aforementioned aspectual meanings are expressed in French and Chinese. In this study, we adopt Arche's (2014) core assumption that the underlying syntactic structure of these semantic (aspectual) interpretations are universal across languages, but that the locus of variation lies in how these semantic interpretations are expressed morpho-syntactically and mapped onto different lexical items. With this in mind, we propose that the acquisition of aspectual morphology is a question of remapping. In this section, we present the acquisition task for each language group, starting with Chinese and finishing with French.

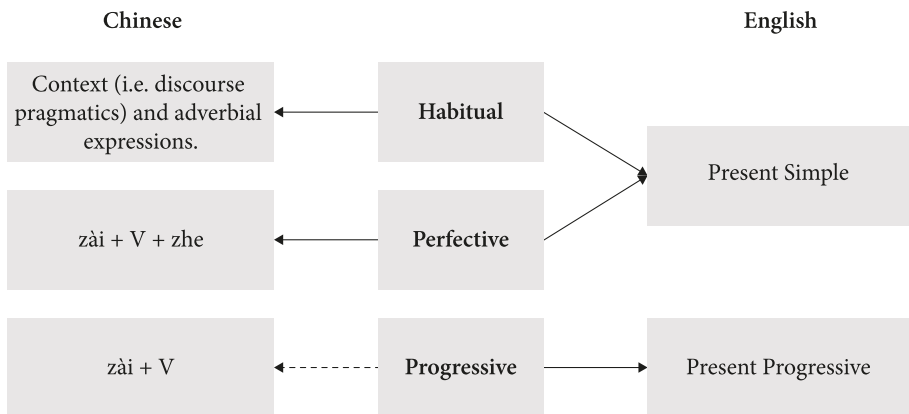


Figure 2. Mapping of form-to-meaning in English and Chinese. The dashed line denotes a feature mapping that is dependent on the lexical properties of the predicate

As illustrated in Figure 2, Mandarin Chinese does not have a dedicated surface inflectional form to express habitual aspect. Instead, it relies on the context (i.e. discourse-pragmatics) and adverbial expressions to (covertly) express such an interpretation (Liu, 2012). L1 speakers of Chinese must therefore remap features that are expressed covertly in the L1 onto new items in the L2. This remapping is predicted to be challenging according to the FRH and Slabakova's cline of featural difficulty, since it involves remapping features that are expressed covertly in the L1 onto (overt) lexical items in the L2. However, Mandarin Chinese does have a dedicated surface inflectional form (i.e. *zài + V*) to (overtly) express progressive aspect, which behaves similarly in many respects to the English Present Progressive form, with the exception that *zài* imposes several

semantic-selection (s-selection) constraints (Liu, 2012). For example, accomplishment and telic predicates, such as those with a goal, path or result, are incompatible with the progressive morpheme (Liu, 2012: 63). Given that our study included both activity and accomplishment predicates, our statistical analysis, if necessary, will factor in these properties to test their influence. Mandarin Chinese is also reported to have a morphosyntactic form (i.e. *zài* + V + *zhe*) that carries a similar interpretation to the reportive (i.e. perfective) interpretation of the Present Simple typically found in narratives (Foley, 2009). However, its morpholexical form is similar to the Mandarin Chinese progressive marker, which could prove confusing to Chinese learners of English. In summary, this analysis suggests one-to-one form-to-meaning mappings for aspectual interpretations in Mandarin Chinese, with the exception of habitual aspect where functional features are expressed covertly.

When acquiring English aspectual morphology, Chinese speakers must learn that the distribution of mappings between forms and meanings differ in English and Chinese. In particular, that habitual aspect is expressed overtly using dedicated surface morphology, rather than covertly using the context and adverbial expressions, and that the morphological form can be used to express not only habitual aspect, but also perfective aspect (i.e., reportive interpretation), which has a one-to-one form-to-meaning mapping in the L1. Additionally, for progressive aspect, Chinese speakers must map the L1 form to its L2 equivalent and expand the s-selection constraints of the English progressive marker to include all predicates, regardless of lexical aspect. This is not expected to be particularly problematic. According to this model, we predict that the habitual – Present Simple, in particular, and the perfective – Present Simple remapping will be problematic for these learners because they would have to remap covertly expressed features onto a new lexical item for the habitual interpretation, while also learning that the surface form (i.e. the Present Simple) in question can express multiple interpretations.

French, on the other hand, is similar to English in that several forms can be mapped onto a single interpretation. As we can see from Figure 3, the *présent* form in French serves a multi-functional purpose in that it can express a progressive, habitual and perfective interpretation. The progressive periphrasis, *être en train de*, can also be used to express progressive aspect, but French speakers typically opt for the present form, using contextual information and adverbial expressions to disambiguate between the meanings (DeWit et al., 2013). Although the perfective interpretation of the *présent* form in French is similar in many respects to its English equivalent, the perfective interpretation of the present is much more frequently used in French than in English.

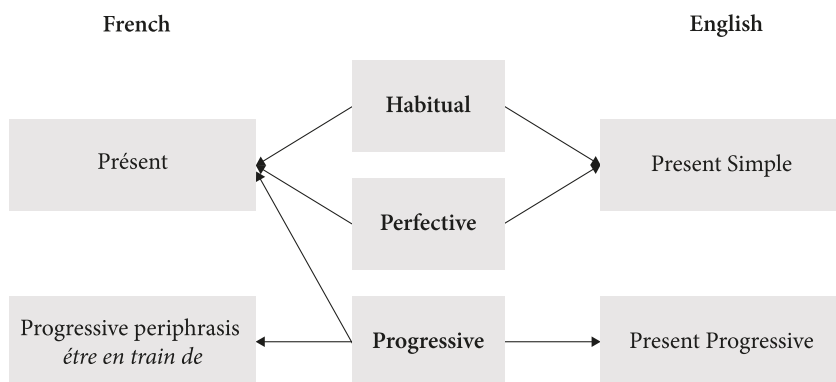


Figure 3. Mapping of form-to-meaning in English and French

The acquisition task is comparatively easier for French speakers than for Chinese speakers. French speakers, however, still need to learn that the L2 equivalent of the *présent* does not express the same range of meanings. Consequently, these speakers must dissociate the progressive interpretation from L2 Present Simple form and map this interpretation to a new surface inflectional form (i.e. be V+ing).

5. Previous studies

As discussed in the introduction, relatively few studies have investigated the L2 acquisition of aspectual contrasts in the English present tense. Existing research appears to suggest an influential role for L1 transfer. However, there is a distinct lack of consensus concerning the acquisitional difficulty. This section seeks to provide a selective overview of these studies.

Slabakova (2003) explored the L2 acquisition of the distinction between progressive and habitual aspect by Bulgarian-speaking instructed L2 learners of English from three proficiency levels: low-intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced. Findings from a truth-value judgment task and a guided composition task revealed that these learners had successfully acquired the following three properties: (1) the simple present cannot express an ongoing event; (2) the Present Progressive can describe an ongoing event; and (3) the English bare verbal form can describe closed or completed events. The third property is not explicitly taught in the Bulgarian classroom. Slabakova thus concluded that learners had been able to successfully map both taught and untaught semantic properties onto the correct morpholexical forms in their interlanguage grammar.

Research by Gabriele and Canales (2011) further supports the acquirability of this aspectual contrast. This study focused on intermediate and advanced L2 learners of English with L1 Japanese and Spanish and included four conditions: (a) the core meanings of the two aspectual forms (the Present Simple and the Present Progressive), (b) the use of the Present Progressive to describe habitual actions, (c) the use of the Present Simple and the Present Progressive with achievements, and (d) the use of the Present Simple and the Present Progressive to express future events. Based on findings from a grammaticality judgment task and an interpretation task, Gabriele and Canales found that L1/L2 similarities did not have a facilitative and/or inhibitory effect. Nevertheless, learners were able to successfully acquire the relevant properties, exhibiting sensitivity to pragmatic constraints through the mapping of contextual information in the interpretation onto the correct aspectual forms.

Evidence from Hawkins et al. (2008), however, appears to suggest that the L1 plays a deterministic role, particularly in terms of the prototypical semantic interpretations of the two forms. Participants in this study included intermediate and advanced learners of English whose L1 was either Chinese, Japanese or a thematic verb-raising language, including Arabic, German, French and Spanish. Findings from a grammaticality judgment task showed that the performance of speakers from verb-raising languages was almost indistinguishable from the native speaker control group, but that Chinese and Japanese speakers exhibited a distinct lack of convergence with the target grammar in their L2 grammar. Al-Thubaiti (2015) found similar results among Arabic-speaking instructed L2 learners using an aspectual interpretation task.

Contrary to Hawkins et al. (2008) study, Liszka (2009, 2015), based on results from an oral production task, a video description task and a contextualised dialogue task, found that French-speaking L2 learners of English, regardless of learning context (i.e. instructed vs. naturalistic), experienced persistent difficulties with the distributional and interpretational properties of the Present Simple and Present Progressive forms. However, unlike previous studies, the tasks included in these studies were predominately (oral) production tasks, which are thought to be more cognitively demanding than traditional interpretation tasks and subject to processing contrasts (cf. the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis, Prévost & White, 2000).

Moreover, we would like to suggest that Liszka's (2009, 2015) findings must be interpreted with caution, given the coding procedure used in this study. For example, in the video clip description task, the use of the Present Progressive was coded as appropriate with thematic verbs, and the production of the Present Simple with thematic verbs was only coded as appropriate when combined with a licensing adverbial expression such as 'then, as soon as, etc.'. This analysis assumed

a one-to-one form – meaning mapping, where the ongoing (progressive) semantic interpretation can only be mapped onto the Present Progressive form. As we have discussed previously in Section 2.2, the Present Simple can also be used in present-based narratives and (sports) commentaries to describe an event that appears to be more or less simultaneous with the speech time. While Liszka (2015: 71) does recognise this highly-marked usage of the simple form, she proposes that the instructions provided to participants were “clear and unambiguous [enough] in order to prime the production of descriptions” and not narratives. However, such instructions threaten the underlying construct validity of the task at hand; hence, it could be argued that this task tests L2 learners’ sensitivity to structural priming,² rather than their knowledge of the interpretational and distributional properties of the aspectual forms.

6. Research questions and predictions

Given the acquisition task described in Section 4 and the previous research presented in Section 5, this study aims to further explore the role of the L1 in modulating aspectual choices in the English present among L2 learners whose first language is either French or Chinese. More specifically, we sought to address the following research questions in light of the FRH and the cline of difficulty:

- Are L2 learners able to remap semantic features that are expressed covertly in the L1 onto new lexical items in the L2?
- Are L2 learners able to learn that one surface form can express multiple meanings in the L2?
- Are L2 learners able to move from an L1 superset to an L2 subset with respect to the range of interpretations a single form can express?

We predict that the ongoing interpretation of the Present Progressive will not be particularly challenging for L1 Chinese speakers because Chinese, like English, has a dedicated surface form to express progressive aspect. However, we anticipate that the habitual – Present Simple, in particular, and the perfective – Present Simple remapping will be problematic because these learners have to remap covertly expressed features onto a new lexical item for the habitual interpretation, while also learning that the surface form (i.e. the Present Simple) can have multiple interpretations. For French speakers, we predict that the acquisition task will be comparatively easier, since L2 learners will only have to learn that the L2

2. Syntactic priming concerns the phenomenon where speakers are more likely to reproduce or repeat an identical structure to the one that they had previously encountered (Bock, 1986; Flett, Branigan, & Pickering, 2013).

equivalent of the *présent* does not express the same range of meanings. Thus, they will need to dissociate the progressive interpretation from the L2 Present Simple form, mapping it to a new surface inflectional form (i.e. *be* V+ing).

7. The study

This study reports on data from an aspectual interpretation task and an oral video description task, both completed by upper-intermediate and advanced L2 learners of English from two different L1 backgrounds: French and Chinese.

7.1 Interpretation task

7.1.1 Participants

Eighty-five participants, in total, took part in the aspectual interpretation task, including 28 native speakers of English and 57 L2 learners of English (27 L1 Chinese speakers and 30 L1 French speakers). Prior to the experiment, all participants completed a background information questionnaire and an independent proficiency test, as used in (Slabakova, 2003).³ L2 learners were considered to be of upper-intermediate to advanced proficiency with an average score of 29.5 ($SD=6.19$) for French native speakers and 28.9 ($SD=5.25$) for Chinese speakers, out of 40. A one-way ANOVA did not reveal a significant difference between the French and Chinese group in terms of proficiency ($F(1,90.71)=3.12$, $p=0.08$). However, in the subsequent statistical analyses, we coded proficiency as a continuous variable.

7.1.2 Task design and procedure

In order to explore the possible role of the L1, we designed an aspectual interpretation task involving 24 short stories and 12 filler stories. The story contexts were between 4–6 sentences long, with 8 stories describing simultaneous (SIM)⁴ contexts, 8 stories describing habitual (HAB) contexts and 8 stories describing reportive (REP) contexts. All stories were presented in English. The verbs

3. The proficiency test was identical to the one used in Slabakova (2003), consisting of part one of the Michigan Test. It involved a multiple-choice grammar test and contained 40 sentences with a blank space. Participants were required to select the most appropriate of four words to fill in the blank. We followed Slabakova's (2003) criteria and considered scores between 16–28 to be upper-intermediate and 29–39 to be advanced learners.

4. Henceforth, we use the SIM abbreviation to refer to simultaneous contexts, i.e. contexts that express progressive, or ongoing, actions.

included in the test sentences were either activity or accomplishment verbs in order to avoid confounds relating to the incompatibility of achievement verbs with certain progressive aspectual markers.

This task was administered on an online survey service hosted by the authors' university. No time constraint was imposed, but most participants took an average of 20 minutes to complete this task. In this task, participants were asked to read a short story-context and then select the sentence (out of four options) that most accurately described the context provided in the short story. Examples of the three contexts are provided below:

- (4) HABITUAL: Every time Beth's family go out, they have to take two cars. It's usually Beth and her dad who drive. Beth hates driving behind her dad on the motorway. He drives so slowly. Beth always tries to drive in front of her dad even if he starts off in front.
 - A. Beth is overtaking her dad.
 - B. Beth overtakes her dad.
 - C. Both sentences in A and B are true descriptions.
 - D. Don't know.
- (5) SIMULTANEOUS: Tom is at the lake with his friends. Tom decides to take a dip in the lake. There are lots of boats. Tom decides to swim to the other side of the lake because he doesn't like boats. Tom sees one approaching him right now. Tom has decided to turn around.
 - A. Tom is swimming to the other side of the lake.
 - B. Tom swims to the other side of the lake.
 - C. Both sentences in A and B are true descriptions.
 - D. Don't know.
- (6) REPORTIVE: Fred loves watching the Grand Prix. This week, it's the Monaco Grand Prix. Fred is in his living room watching it on TV. The commentator is excitedly saying: "And Button is just behind Schumacher. Button accelerates around the bend."
 - A. Button is overtaking Schumacher.
 - B. Button overtakes Schumacher.
 - C. Both sentences in A and B are true descriptions.
 - D. Don't know.

The sentences in Option (A) and (B) were considered to be grammatical out of context, but their appropriateness in context was determined by the short story. In the progressive situation context, the Present Progressive form (Option A) was expected, whereas the Present Simple form (Option B) was expected in habitual contexts. Option (C) was made available for the reportive context, where both forms were considered equally acceptable. This option also allowed us to test for

L1 transfer from the French grammar since both interpretations are possible with the *présent* form. We included the “don’t know” option to prevent participants from selecting an answer at random when they were not sure.

7.1.3 Statistical analyses

We analysed the data using a series of pairwise comparisons given the categorical nature of our dependent variable. The pairs were as follows: (1) the Present Progressive vs. the Present Simple, (2) the Present Progressive vs. “both tenses are possible” answers and (3) the Present Simple vs. both. The “don’t know” responses were excluded from the dataset. In this article, we will only present analyses from the first pair. Using the remaining dataset, we computed mixed-effects binomial logistic regression models using the *glmer* function of the *lme4* package (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015) in the R environment (R Development Core Team, 2014). Where possible, we fitted each model using the ‘maximal’ random effects structure (Barr, Levy, Scheepers, & Tily, 2013) that converged.

Given the multicollinearity⁵ between the predictor variables, proficiency and L1, we were unable to run a model including both proficiency and L1 as fixed effects. To compensate for this, we ran two separate models based on L1 and proficiency. The first model used the whole dataset and included L1 as a fixed factor, whereas the second model focused on L2 data and included L1 and proficiency as fixed factors. Since proficiency did not reach significance, the estimates of the second model will not be presented here.

7.1.4 Results: Interpretation task

In this section, we examine speakers’ choice of form (Present Simple, Present Progressive or both) in each of the three contexts (habitual, simultaneous and reportive). The Present Simple was expected in the habitual condition; the Present Progressive in the simultaneous condition and both forms were possible in the reportive condition.

7.1.4.1 Descriptive statistics

Figure 4 presents the mean percentage of each response by condition and test group. In the habitual context, all speaker groups almost exclusively selected the Present Simple option, as expected. In the simultaneous event context, speakers demonstrated a clear preference for the Present Progressive, as would be expected. Interestingly, speakers, particularly the L1 English and Chinese groups, also accepted the Present Simple or both forms, albeit to a lesser degree. Aspectual

5. Multicollinearity refers to the occurrence of high intercorrelations between predictor variables in a regression model.

choices in the reportive context, however, were somewhat mixed in that speakers appeared to alternate between the three options, with the English and French speaker groups only marginally preferring the Present Simple and the Chinese group the Present Progressive. In the following section, we report the inferential statistics that can tell us more about whether or not the differences between condition and test group reached significance.

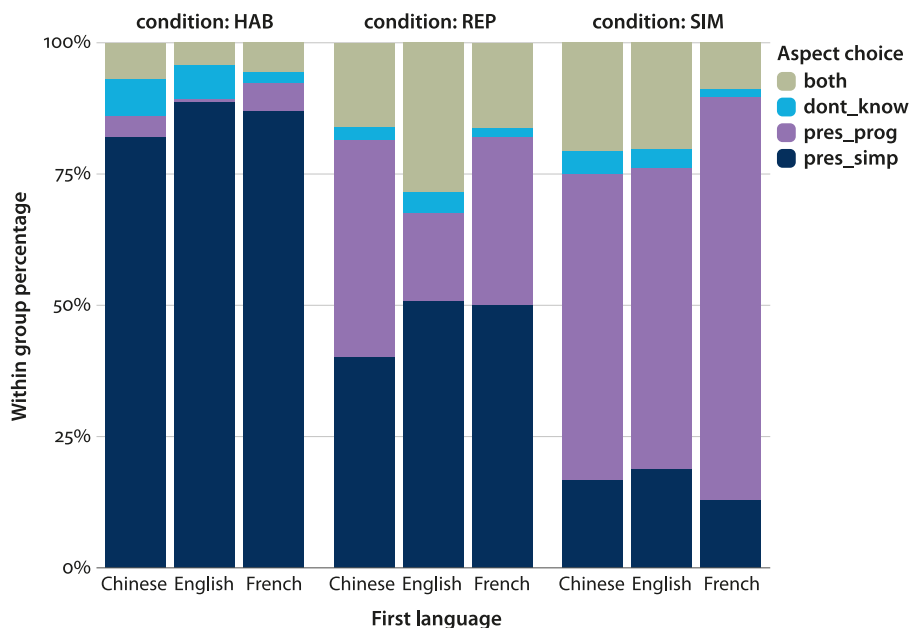


Figure 4. Aspectual tense choice in the Aspectual Interpretation Task (REP=reportive context; SIM=progressive, or simultaneous, context; HAB=habitual context)

7.1.4.2 Inferential statistics: Mixed-effects model

7.1.4.2.1 Comparison of the Present Simple and the Present Progressive

This sub-section presents the analysis comparing the Present Simple response with the Present Progressive response. The estimates of our model are shown in Table 1. These estimates are approximations of the binomial parameter, which, in this case, concerns the likelihood that the 'Present Simple' response is chosen over the 'Present Progressive' response. The estimates are presented on the logit scale. The odds ratio measures the effect size. Excluding the intercept itself, these numbers illustrate how the odds of producing the Present Simple over the Present Progressive change for a specific level of a factor, in comparison to the level

represented by the intercept. For example, the odds of the L1 French group producing the Present Simple are estimated to be 0.06 higher than for participants in the L1 English group (for the HAB condition, see the paragraph below).

Table 1. Estimates, standard errors, z-values and p-values of the binomial mixed-effects model

Fixed effects	Log odds (logit)	Odds ratio	Std. error	z value	p value
(Intercept)	7.35	1553.85	1.61	4.55	0.001
L1: French	-2.88	0.06	1.38	-2.09	0.04
L1: Chinese	-2.30	0.10	1.41	-1.63	0.10
Condition: REP	-5.95	0.00	1.68	-3.54	0.001
Condition: SIM	-8.73	0.00	1.65	-5.30	0.001
L1: French and Condition: REP	2.08	8.04	1.46	1.43	0.15
L1: Chinese and Condition: REP	0.84	2.31	1.49	0.56	0.58
L1: French and Condition: SIM	2.06	7.84	1.39	1.48	0.14
L1: Chinese and Condition: SIM	2.16	8.65	1.42	1.52	0.13
Random effects	Variance	Std. Dev.			
Participant ID					
(Intercept)	4.53	2.13			
Condition: REP	6.53	2.56			
Condition: SIM	3.33	1.82			
Item Number					
(Intercept)	0.69	0.83			

(REP = reportive context; SIM = progressive, or simultaneous, context; HAB = habitual context)
Number of observations = 1759; Pseudo-R² (fixed effects) = 0.62; Pseudo-R² (total) = 0.80.

The intercept in mixed-effects models always describes one combination of factor levels in particular. Here, the intercept represents the L1 English group in the habitual condition. From Table 1, we can see that there was a significant difference between the L1 English and L1 French group ($p = 0.04$). However, Table 1 alone does not tell us about contrasts that do not involve the intercept (for example, if we wanted to contrast the L1 French group with the L1 Chinese group). Using the *emmeans* package (Lenth, 2018), the data have been redistributed in Table 2 to display pairwise comparisons for all Condition contrasts and L1 groups.

The pairwise comparisons are presented in Table 2. Here, we see that participants, regardless of L1 background, demonstrated distinct aspectual choices between conditions. Of particular note is the distinction between habitual and progressive contexts made by L2 learners.

Table 2. Estimates, standard errors, z-values and p-values of the binomial mixed-effects model

L1	Contrast	Log odds (logit)	Odds ratio	SE	df	z ratio	p value
English	HAB / REP	5.95	384.91	646.61	Inf	3.54	< 0.001
	HAB / SIM	8.73	6155.68	10133.24	Inf	5.30	< 0.001
	REP / SIM	2.77	15.99	9.51	Inf	4.66	< 0.001
French	HAB / REP	3.87	47.87	54.66	Inf	3.39	< 0.001
	HAB / SIM	6.67	784.95	870.64	Inf	6.01	< 0.001
	REP / SIM	2.8	16.40	9.43	Inf	4.86	< 0.001
Chinese	HAB / REP	5.12	166.73	211.03	Inf	4.04	< 0.001
	HAB / SIM	6.57	711.55	876.23	Inf	5.33	< 0.001
	REP / SIM	1.45	4.27	2.44	Inf	2.54	0.03

(REP = reportive context; SIM = progressive, or simultaneous, context; HAB = habitual context)

Table 3. Probability of choosing the Present Simple over the Present Progressive

L1 / Condition	HAB	REP	SIM
English	1.00	0.80	0.20
French	0.99	0.64	0.10
Chinese	0.99	0.48	0.18

(REP = reportive context; SIM = progressive, or simultaneous context; HAB = habitual context)

Table 3 presents the probabilities of choosing the Present Simple over the Present Progressive according to L1 background and condition. These probabilities were calculated using the *emmeans* package by adding *type* = “response”. In particular, we see that the Present Simple is almost exclusively used in habitual contexts, whereas in simultaneous contexts, the Present Progressive is largely preferred. However, in the reportive condition, participants appear to alternate between the two forms, with the L1 English and French groups preferring the Present Simple, albeit to varying, but not significantly so, degrees.

7.1.4.3 Interim summary

The results presented above show that all participant groups, regardless of L1 background, are able to successfully differentiate between aspectual tense choice in habitual and progressive use. These findings suggest that at the levels of proficiency tested in this study, the L1 featural configurations of the L2 grammars do not appear to impede or even modulate successful acquisition, such that L2 speakers are able to reliably select the Present Progressive in simultaneous contexts, and the Present Simple in habitual contexts, in a target-like fashion. A surprising finding in the L1 English speaker data was the higher than expected acceptance of the

‘both’ and ‘Present Simple’ option in the simultaneous condition. Such a finding may suggest that the form-to-meaning mappings and thus the input to which L2 learners are exposed may not be as categorical as the literature may suggest.

Results for the reportive condition are more complex, perhaps due to the fact that both forms are equally acceptable in this condition, as well as the ‘both’ option. However, our dataset appears to suggest that the native language modulates aspectual choice in the reportive condition, as illustrated by a significant difference between the English and Chinese group. Here, we find higher proportions of the Present Progressive over the Present Simple, when compared with the L1 English and French test group. Interestingly, L1 English speakers are more likely to accept the ‘both’ option than any other L1 groups, perhaps due to the fact that it requires higher working memory to entertain both options rather than just one, and cognitive resources are typically limited in the second language.

7.2 Production task

7.2.1 *Participants*

Of the 85 participants from the interpretation task, 45 also took part in the production task, including 15 L1 English speakers, 15 L1 Chinese speakers and 15 L1 French speakers. All participants completed a background information questionnaire and the same independent proficiency measure as the Aspectual Interpretation Task. L2 learners were considered to be of upper-intermediate proficiency with an average score of 30.3 ($SD=4.89$) for French native speakers and 28.3 ($SD=5.66$) for Chinese speakers out of 40. A one-way ANOVA did not reveal a significant difference between the French and Chinese group in terms of proficiency ($F(1,19.82)=45.7, p=0.43$).

7.2.2 *Task design and procedure*

In order to test the effects of L1 transfer on real-time oral production, we asked participants to complete a modified version of the video description task from Liszka’s (2009, 2015) study. Participants completed this task approximately a week after the Aspectual Interpretation Task in a laboratory setting. Prior to watching the video, participants received the following instructions: “Describe the events orally at the same time as the video”. Unlike Liszka’s (2009, 2015) original study, we omitted structural priming, i.e., the use of the Present Progressive tense in the instructions. Thus, only imperative forms appeared in the instructions. In Dudley and Slabakova (in press), we discuss the effects of this structural priming in more detail. The video in question was a 9-minute clip from the British television series, *The Return of Mr Bean*. During the clip, the audio from the original recording was muted and the data were audio-recorded.

7.2.3 Data analysis

The data was transcribed and coded for verbal morphology. Verbal forms other than the Present Progressive or the Present Simple were excluded from the analysis. We followed Liszka's (2009, 2015) coding procedure, establishing obligatory Present Progressive contexts (OC Present Progressive) and obligatory Present Simple contexts (OC Present Simple). In OC Present Progressive, the use of the Present Progressive with event predicates was coded as acceptable. The use of the Present Simple in this context was coded as unacceptable in the absence of an appropriate licensing adverbial expression, such as 'then, suddenly, as soon as, etc.' In OC Present Simple, the use of the Present Simple was considered acceptable when combined with stative predicates (e.g. *know*, *want*, *feel*, etc.), copular verb forms (e.g. *be* + adjective) and eventive predicates in the presence of an appropriate licensing adverbial expression. This article will only focus on data from OC Present Progressive.

For the production data, we computed mixed-effects binomial logistic regression models using the *glmer* function of the *lme4* package (Bates et al., 2015) in the R environment (R Core Team, 2014). Where possible, we fitted each model using the 'maximal' random effects structure (Barr, Levy, Scheepers, & Tily, 2013) that converged.

As with the interpretation data, due to the issue of multicollinearity between predictor variables, we were unable to run a model including both proficiency and L1 as fixed effects, at least on the whole dataset. To compensate for this, we initially ran two separate models based on L1 and proficiency. The first model used the whole dataset and included L1 as a fixed factor, whereas the second model focused on L2 data and included L1 and proficiency as fixed factors. Since proficiency did not reach significance, the estimates of Model 2 will not be presented here.

7.2.4 Results: Production task

7.2.4.1 Descriptive statistics

Figure 5 presents aspectual form use by context and test group. In OC Present Progressive contexts, that is, describing ongoing events, speakers demonstrate optionality between the two forms, to the extent that French and English speakers use the two forms in almost equal measure. In the following section, we report the inferential statistics that show us whether or not the differences between condition and test group reached significance. As we can see from Figure 5, all speakers, regardless of L1 background, produced the Present Simple in OC Present Simple contexts (with habitual meanings and in the presence of adverbials such as *every day*).

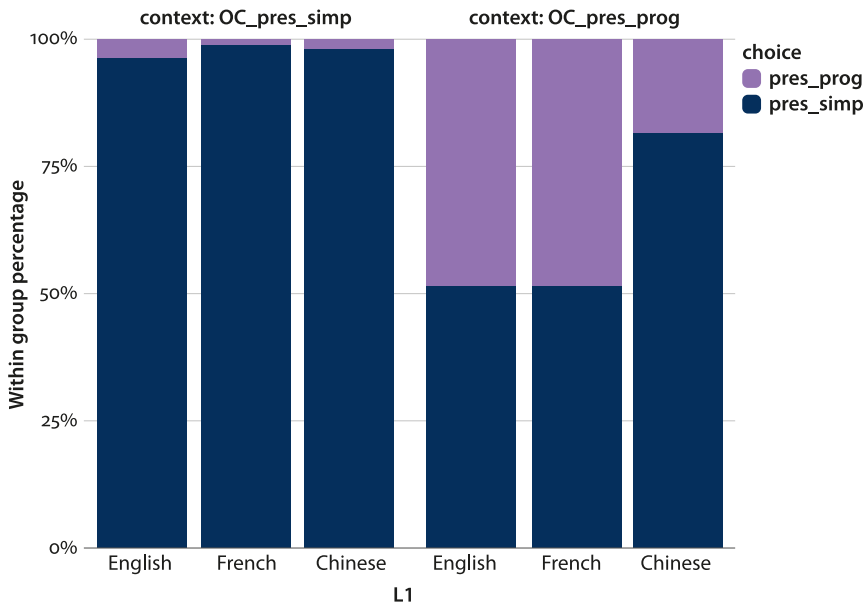


Figure 5. Aspectual tense use in the Oral Production

7.2.4.2 Inferential statistics: Mixed-effects model

The estimates of our model are shown in Table 4. These estimates are approximations of the binomial parameter, which, in this case, concerns the likelihood that the ‘Present Simple’ response is produced over the ‘Present Progressive’ response. The estimates are presented on the logit scale. The odds ratio measures the effect size. Excluding the intercept itself, these numbers illustrate how the odds of producing the Present Simple over the Present Progressive change for a specific level of a factor, in comparison to the level represented by the intercept. For example, for participants in the L1 French group, the odds of producing the Present Simple over the Present Progressive are estimated to be 3.55 times higher than in the L1 English group in OC Present Simple.

The intercept in mixed-effects models always expresses one combination of factor levels in particular. Here, the intercept represents the L1 English group in OC Present Simple. From Table 4, we can see that there were significant differences in aspectual tense choice between the L1 English and L1 French group ($p=0.03$) and between the OC Present Simple and OC Present Progressive. However, Table 4 alone does not tell us about contrasts that do not involve the intercept (for example, if we wanted to contrast the L1 French group with the L1 Chinese group). Using the *emmeans* package (Lenth, 2018), the data have been regrouped in Table 5 and Table 6 to display pairwise comparisons for all context contrasts and L1 groups.

Table 4. Estimates, standard errors, z-values and p-values of the binomial mixed-effects model

Fixed effects	Log odds (logit)	Odds ratio	Std. Error	z value	p value
(Intercept)	3.49	32.78	0.33	10.43	<0.001
L1: French	1.27	3.55	0.57	2.23	0.03
L1: Chinese	0.76	2.13	0.51	1.49	0.14
Context: OC Present Progressive	-3.65	0.03	0.42	-8.77	<0.001
L1: French and Context: OC Present Progressive	-1.10	0.33	0.67	-1.64	0.10
L1: Chinese and Context: OC Present Simple	0.99	2.69	0.62	1.60	0.11
Random effects	Variance	Std. Dev.			
Participant ID					
(Intercept)	0.44	0.66			
(tab) Condition: REP	1.23	1.11			

Number of observations = 4362; Pseudo-R² (fixed effects) = 0.41; Pseudo-R² (total) = 0.62.

Table 5. Estimates, standard errors, z-values and p-values of the binomial mixed-effects model

Condition	Contrast	Log odds (logit)	Odds ratio	SE	df	z ratio	p value
OC Present Simple	English / French	-1.27	0.28	0.57	Inf	-2.23	0.07
	English / Chinese	-0.76	0.47	0.51	Inf	-1.49	0.30
	French / Chinese	0.51	1.67	0.65	Inf	0.79	0.71
OC Present Progressive	English / French	-0.17	0.85	0.60	Inf	-0.28	0.96
	English / Chinese	-1.75	0.17	0.59	Inf	-2.96	0.01
	French / Chinese	-1.58	0.21	0.59	Inf	-2.66	0.02

The pairwise comparisons are presented in Table 5 and Table 6. Table 5 shows that L1 background did not significantly modulate aspectual use in OC Present Simple. Yet, in OC Present Progressive, we observed a significant difference

Table 6. Estimates, standard errors, z-values and p-values of the binomial mixed-effects model

L1	Contrast	Log odds (logit)	Odds ratio	SE	df	z ratio	p value
English	OC PS / OC PP	3.65	38.3	15.91	Inf	8.773	<.0001
French	OC PS / OC PP	4.75	115.2	66.51	Inf	8.224	<.0001
Chinese	OC PS / OC PP	2.65	14.2	7.24	Inf	5.209	<.0001

between the L1 English and L1 Chinese groups. Table 6, however, suggests that despite significant differences between these two groups, all three test groups demonstrated significantly distinct aspectual use between obligatory contexts.

Table 7. Probability of choosing the Present Simple over the Present Progressive

L1 / Context	OC Present simple	OC Present progressive
English	0.97	0.46
French	0.99	0.50
Chinese	0.99	0.83

Table 7 presents the probabilities of using the Present Simple over the Present Progressive according to L1 background and context. These probabilities were calculated using the *emmeans* package by adding *type = "response"*. In particular, we see that the Present Simple is almost exclusively used in OC Present Simple. Conversely, in OC Present Progressive, participants appear to alternate between the two forms, with the L1 English and French groups using these forms in almost equal distribution. The L1 Chinese group, however, tend to produce the Present Progressive much more frequently.

7.2.4.3 Interim summary

Results from the production task showed that speakers almost exclusively used the Present Simple in the OC Present Simple, as expected. However, findings in the OC Present Progressive demonstrates a significant degree of variation, particularly among the English and French speakers, who alternated in almost equal measure between the two forms. This was in contrast to the Chinese speakers, who demonstrated a distinct preference for the Present Simple in that context.

8. Discussion

We initially predicted that the L1 would modulate the aspectual choices of our participants in the contexts we presented them with. More specifically, we anticipated that the ongoing interpretation of the Present Progressive would not be particularly challenging for L1 Chinese speakers, but that the habitual – Present Simple, in particular, and the perfective – Present Simple remapping would be problematic. These learners would have to remap covertly expressed features onto a new lexical item for the habitual interpretation, while also learning that the surface form (i.e. the Present Simple) can express multiple interpretations. For French speakers, we predicted that the acquisition task would be comparatively easier since L2 learners would only have to learn that the L2 equivalent of the *présent* does not express the same range of meanings. Thus, they needed to dissociate the progressive interpretation from the L2 Present Simple form, mapping it to a new surface inflectional form (i.e. *be V+ing*).

The production and interpretation data together reveal an interesting picture. Let us recall that English instructional materials insist on the two prototypical meanings of the Present Progressive and Present Simple. In particular, the progressive should describe ongoing events, or events simultaneous with the moment of speaking, while the Present Simple should be mapped onto habitual events that include the present moment. However, the English native speaker behaviour in our study was different. A particularly striking aspect of our dataset was the unexpected variation in aspectual choices in the simultaneous event condition. Although English speakers did indeed demonstrate a distinct preference for the Present Progressive in simultaneous event contexts, we also found a much higher than expected acceptance of the Present Simple, as well as of both aspectual forms. Essentially, one meaning, the habitual, was almost exclusively associated with one form, while the other meaning, the ongoing event reading, was mapped onto two forms.

These unexpected findings relating to native speakers' aspectual tense usage suggest that the input to which L2 learners are exposed is indeed ambiguous, such that English speakers associate the simultaneous event interpretation with more than just one morphosyntactic form. Previous research has shown that L2 learners must be exposed to an abundant amount of unambiguous input for successful acquisition to proceed (Slabakova, 2015). Thus, the present findings have important implications for language pedagogy (see Section 9). The classroom instruction for learners of English is typically based on the expected behaviour of the native speaker, that is, the prototypical form – meaning mappings. However, it appears that learners of English may be exposed to significantly more complicated input. In particular, they are exposed to variability to the extent of free choice,

but not in all contexts. The interested reader is encouraged to consult Dudley and Slabakova (in press) for a more in-depth discussion of variation in aspectual choices in the production task.

However, despite this variation, we find that learners, regardless of L1 background, are able to reliably select the Present Simple in habitual contexts and the Present Progressive in simultaneous contexts, as demonstrated in the interpretation task.

These results both support and contradict existing findings from the literature. For example, Hawkins et al. (2008) found that speakers from verb-raising languages, such as French, were able to successfully acquire these prototypical associations, whereas Chinese speakers were not. Note, however, the relatively small sample size of the Hawkins et al. study that only included 10 verb-raising language speakers and 8 Chinese speakers. Interestingly, based on a battery of predominately production tasks, Liszka (2009, 2015) found that French speakers experienced persistent difficulties with the prototypical interpretations even at the advanced stages of proficiency. Our findings, to the contrary, suggest that both French and Chinese speakers are able to successfully acquire the relevant distributional and interpretational properties of the aspectual forms under study.

More generally, these results suggest that L2 learners are eventually able to acquire linguistic properties that require remapping even in contexts where semantic features are expressed covertly in the L1 but overtly in the L2 and where the L1 imposes strict s-selection constraints. By s-selection constraints, we refer to the phenomenon in Chinese where accomplishment and telic predicates, such as those with a goal, path or result, are incompatible with the progressive morpheme (Liu, 2012: 163). These findings are not fully in line with our initial predictions, which were informed by the Feature Reassembly approach. Recall the prediction relating to the difficulty of the habitual-Present Simple mapping for Chinese learners and, to a lesser extent, the difficulty of the simultaneous-Present Progressive mapping for French speakers. These findings suggest that upper-intermediate to advanced L2 learners are able to map covertly expressed L1 features onto new L2 lexical items, contra the cline of feature difficulty presented in Figure 1 (Slabakova, 2009; Cho & Slabakova, 2014: 166). Moreover, it suggests that L2 learners are able to perform feature remapping/reassembly by dissociating an interpretation (i.e. feature bundle) from one form and mapping it onto a new surface inflectional form, a task predicted to be somewhat challenging by the FRH (Lardiere, 2009).

For the reportive reading, as tested in the reportive condition in the interpretation task and the OC Present Progressive in the production task, the results are more complex. More specifically, in the interpretation task, English and French speakers appear to select the Present Simple more often than the

Present Progressive, whereas Chinese speakers prefer the Present Progressive, albeit only marginally so. Note, however, that the difference between the French and Chinese speakers was not significant. Conversely, in the OC Present Progressive, while English and Chinese speakers alternated in almost equal measure between the two forms, Chinese speakers demonstrate a distinct preference for the Present Simple.

These results thus suggest that the L1 plays a decisive role in the acquisition of the reportive interpretation but only for Chinese speakers. However, it seems that findings from the interpretation and production task lie in direct opposition to each other. In production, Chinese speakers use the Present Simple more often than the Present Progressive, whereas in interpretation, these learners prefer the Present Progressive. It is worth noting here that most of the Present Simple forms produced consisted of the bare surface form without the appropriate inflectional morphology.

We thus argue that in production, Chinese speakers' supply the Present Simple more often because it is the default form. For example, in Chinese, the bare surface form can be used, together with contextual information and adverbial expressions, to express the same aspectual and temporal information that an inflected form in English would. Moreover, a significant learning task for Chinese speakers is to discern how to express temporal information overtly via the morphosyntax, rather than covertly via discourse-pragmatics, a task which is predicted to be especially challenging (Cho & Slabakova, 2014; Slabakova, 2009). Finally, it is well documented that online oral production is significantly more cognitively demanding than interpretation, such that L1 effects are more likely to be visible in production (Prévost & White, 2000).

9. Pedagogical implications

It has been widely assumed that the generative approach to L2 acquisition has little to say about how language should be taught in the classroom. We, however, argue that the findings from our research have some pedagogical implications, especially with respect to variability in native speaker input and the ultimate acquirability of aspectual contrasts.

It is important that language educators are aware of the one-sided variability in the native speaker usage, which ultimately translates into learner input. This is especially relevant for teachers who are interested in developing the performance and comprehension of learners at lower proficiency levels. For example, language educators must highlight to learners that the Present Simple form can express multiple meanings, whereas the Present Progressive is typically associated with one meaning only.

This distinct variation in the native speaker input also has important implications in terms of the extent to which we consider L1/L2 differences as non-targetlike. For example, although we observed L1 influence in both the production and interpretation data, particularly with respect to the non-prototypical reportive interpretation of the Present Simple, this does not necessarily mean that the learners have not acquired the property in question. Instead, language educators should be aware not only of the inter-speaker variation, but also of the ultimate acquirability of aspectual contrasts in the English present tense. Our study has shown that learners are able to acquire with relative success meanings such as the reportive present, an interpretation that is not explicitly taught in the classroom.

10. Conclusion

Overall, our findings have important implications for current debates in the field of L2 acquisition, particularly with respect to ultimate attainment, the role of input and language pedagogy. Based on the findings presented in this article and the subsequent discussion, we conclude that the expression of aspectual present tense does not always have to constitute an insurmountable barrier to learners of English, at least for the upper-intermediate to advanced proficiency levels tested in this study. This successful acquisition is in spite of the different mappings in L1/L2 feature expressions we discussed and the unexpected variability in the input. We must underscore, however, that the learners in this study were predominately upper-intermediate to advanced learners. If teachers want to improve performance and comprehension at lower levels of proficiency, they must be aware of the one-sided variability of the native speaker usage, which turns into learner input. The Present Simple form can express multiple meanings, while the Present Progressive is associated with one meaning only. Although L1 influence does indeed surface in both production and interpretation when testing the non-prototypical reportive interpretation, such L1/L2 differences do not necessarily have to be considered non-targetlike, in light of the distinct variation that native speakers themselves demonstrate in their own production and interpretation. Language educators should thus be aware of this situation, specifically of the acquirability of aspectual contrasts in the English present tense. Even meanings that are not explicitly taught, such as the reportive present, are largely successfully acquired. Teachers can help their learners work faster through the level of variation presented by English native speakers' aspectual tense usage. Finally, our results have demonstrated that the Feature Reassembly Hypotheses provides a fruitful framework through which we can generate testable hypotheses.

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