The Aspect Hypothesis and L2 Learners’ Awareness of Lexical Aspect

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Abstract

The Aspect Hypothesis claims that language learners are influenced by lexical aspectual classes of verbs (and predicates) when they use tense-aspect markings in their target language (Andersen & Shirai, 1994). While acquiring English as a L2, for instance, Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds (1995) and Lee (2001) found that learners tended to use the past tense marking -ed with verbs and predicates which semantically entail inherent endpoints (e.g. die and draw a picture) and add the progressive affix -ing to verbs which are semantically dynamic and durative (e.g. play and swim). A closer look at this hypothesis, however, will reveal that there seems to be a paradox implied in its central claim. That is, for the hypothesis to be plausible, first, a crucial premise that language learners are (consciously or unconsciously) aware of lexical aspect in their target language needs to be accepted. It is paradoxical that language learners are, on the one hand, influenced by verbal aspect when they use temporal markings and, on the other hand, possibly insensitive to lexical aspectual classes of verbs. The present research is the first study to point out this paradox, and three relevant studies have been conducted in an English L2 learning context to support our argument. First, a corpus study was carried out with data coming from an English L2 learner corpus. The corpus data showed, in L2 learners’ writings, there was indeed a strong correlation between the use of tense-aspect markings and lexical aspect, thus confirming the prediction of the Aspect Hypothesis. Then, a study including several elicitation tests used to investigate L2 learners’ awareness of lexical aspect displayed that L2 learners were actually insensitive to lexical aspect. The results of the two studies thus confirmed the existence of a paradox implied in the central claim of the Aspect Hypothesis. To further provide a plausible account for the paradox, we analyzed L2 learners’ input and found that it had a similar and less absolute distribution of tense-aspect markers across aspectual classes. This suggests that learners could be simply producing the same distribution of temporal markings for specific verbs that they encounter in their input. Such an alternative account avoids the need to assume that learners rely on the subtle semantic distinctions of aspectual classes to use tense-aspect markings predicted by the Aspect Hypothesis.

Introduction

According to Andersen & Shirai (1994), the central claim of the Aspect Hypothesis refers to that “first and second language learners will initially be
influenced by the inherent semantic aspect of verbs or predicates in the acquisition of tense and aspect markers associated with or affixed to these verbs” (p.133). While acquiring English, for instance, a learner tends to use the past marking -ed with verbs (and predicate) that semantically entail clear endpoints (e.g. *jump* and *draw a picture*) and add the progressive affix -ing to verbs which are semantically dynamic and durative (e.g. *play* and *swim*). In the past three decades, a great number of studies have been conducted to test this hypothesis, and most of them provided positive evidence to confirm it (e.g. Antinucci & Miller, 1976; Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995; Bloom, Lifter, and Hafitz, 1980; Lee, 2001; Robison, 1995; Shirai & Andersen, 1995).

Although the Aspect Hypothesis has been confirmed by numerous studies, it is not without problems. For example, for the hypothesis to be plausible, a crucial premise that language learners are (consciously or unconsciously) aware of lexical aspect in their target language needs to be accepted. If it is shown that language learners do not necessarily grasp the verbal aspect in their target language, the premise will be undermined and the Aspect Hypothesis will be no longer tenable. It is paradoxical that language learners are, on the one hand, influenced by verbal aspect when they use temporal markings and, on the other hand, possibly insensitive to lexical aspectual classes of verbs. To investigate if there is indeed a paradox implied in the central claim of the Aspect Hypothesis, three relevant studies have been conducted in an English L2 learning context. The first is a corpus study which aims at testing if there is a correlation between L2 learners’ use of tense-aspect markings and L2 lexical aspect, i.e. the examination of the Aspect Hypothesis. The second study includes several elicitation tests which are used to examine L2 learners’ awareness of verbal aspect. To look for other plausible accounts which explain the distribution of temporal markers in L2 use, in the third study, we test the Distributional Bias Hypothesis (Andersen, 1988) by examining the input addressed to L2 learners. If it is shown that the input has a similar distribution of tense-aspect markers across aspectual classes, we can avoid the need to assume that learners rely on the subtle semantic distinctions of aspectual classes to use temporal markings predicted by the Aspect Hypothesis.

**Study 1: Using L2 Learner Corpus Data to Test the Aspect Hypothesis**

The purpose of this study is to use data retrieved from a machine-readable corpus which contains nearly four million words produced by Taiwan English L2 learners to generally test the Aspect Hypothesis. Basically, the data stored in the corpus was mainly from an online writing platform, IWILL (Intelligent Web-based Interactive
Language Learning) (Wible, Kuo, Chien, Liu, and Tsao, 2001). Through IWiLL, teachers can freely assign writing assignments to their students and check the students’ essays online, and all of the words produced by these learners are automatically stored in an L2 learner corpus, English TLC (English Taiwan Learner Corpus). For this study, we decided to focus on the tense-aspect markers used with twenty-four verbs stored in English TLC. These verbs were chosen because they were usually used as examples by previous researchers to introduce the four lexical aspectual classes in English and, by focusing on these verbs whose lexical aspectual categories were confirmed, we can avoid the problem of incorrect coding of verbal aspect leading a researcher to test the Aspect Hypothesis in a wrong way. A list of the 24 verbs classified by lexical aspect is shown in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Categories</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>States</td>
<td>know, feel, think, see, believe, like, need, want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>build, eat, write, run, play, study, walk, work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishments</td>
<td>build __, eat __, write __, run __, play __, study __, walk __, work __</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievements</td>
<td>become, begin, find, die, happen, discover, realize, start</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.  Types of Verbs Searched in English TLC

The twenty-four verbs were then used as keywords to be searched in English TLC. Totally 6,201 tokens of verbs (or predicates) used in finite clauses with their temporal inflections were collected and classified into the four types: states (4271), activities (248), accomplishments (266), and achievements (1416). Tables 2-5 below display the tokens and percentages of the verbs used in past and progressive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>1326</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.  Tense-Aspect Markings Used with STATIVE Verbs
As Tables 2-5 demonstrate, the corpus study reported here offers clear evidence that, consistent with the main claim of the Aspect Hypothesis, there was indeed a strong correlation between verbal aspect and L2 learners’ use of temporal markings. Specifically, telic verbs (accomplishments and achievements) were predominantly inflected for past tense (55% and 59%, respectively), unlike states and activities, which received significantly smaller percentages of past markers (31% and 25%, respectively). In addition, compared with the other three kinds of verbs, activity verbs were more likely to be used in progressive (21%). With the data presented here, we can confidently conclude that, in Chinese-speaking learners’ English L2 productions, tense-aspect inflections correlated significantly with lexical aspect.

**Study 2: Testing L2 Learners’ Awareness of Lexical Aspect**

In this study, our purpose is to test whether L2 learners are sensitive to lexical aspect in their target language or not. This has been done with the results gathered from two types of elicitation tests designed on the basis of the methodologies of two previous studies (i.e. Slabakova, 1999; Yu & Butler, 2000) within which the researchers partially tested L2 learners’ awareness of verbal semantics. The first one was a multiple-choice test which examined the learners’ awareness of both *stativity* and *punctuality* of verbs. The second test, a true/false test, was to test if the subjects were sensitive to the *telicity* implied in certain English verbs and predicates (e.g. *write a paper* and *eat a cake*). (1)~(3) below are example questions used in the study to test:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4. Tense-Aspect Markings Used with ACCOMPLISHMENT Verbs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>829</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5. Tense-Aspect Markings Used with ACHIEVEMENT Verbs**
the learners’ interpretations of verbal punctuality, stativity, and telicity.

(1) I guess he died __________. (a) for one week (b) one week ago
(2) I __________ him so much right now. (a) still like (b) am still liking
(3) I wrote a wonderful paper though I’ve not finished it.

If a subject’s answers to the questions in (1) and (2) was “a” and “b,” he/she gave evidence of being unaware of the verbal semantics of the two verbs *die* and *like*. In addition, if a subject did not indicate the sentence (3) was illogical and explain why he/she thought the sentence was incorrect, it appears that he/she did not sense that the first clause in this sentence was telic and it was odd to say that the action was unfinished in the second clause.

The participants involved in the study were 34 students studying in the Blessed Imelda’s School in Taiwan. All of them were first-year senior high school students and had received formal English L2 instruction for at least four years and possessed basic English reading and writing abilities. Figures 1-3 below display the numbers of subjects who were insensitive to the lexical aspect of verbs used in this study.

![Figure 1. Numbers of Subjects Not Sensitive to the Lexical Aspect of Stative Verbs](image-url)
According to the results collected from the two lexical aspect tests, it seems there was indeed a strong possibility that L2 learners were unaware of the lexical aspect in their second language. Among the thirty-four subjects examined, about half of them were not sensitive to the verbal aspect of both stative and punctual verbs and only two subjects were aware of the telic sense implied in one telicity-interpretation sentence. Specifically, in the multiple-choice test, about half of the subjects did not know *seem*, *like*, and *know* were inherently stative verbs and used the semantically dynamic progressive marking *–ing* with them. Concerning the punctuality-interpretation
questions, there were respectively 16 and 12 subjects who showed unawareness of the lexical aspect of the verbs *die* and *happen* by wrongly modifying these with durative *for-* adverbials. In the true/false test, it was found that almost all of the subjects were not sensitive to the telicity implied in the first clauses in these telicity-interpretation sentences and only two subjects were considered being aware of the telic sense of the predicate “*wrote a wonderful paper*.” The results got from the tests clearly showed that L2 learners were not consistently sensitive to the L2 verbal aspect and, particularly, telicity was the most difficult aspect for these learners. The results of this study as well as the corpus study thus confirmed the existence of a paradox implied in the central claim of the Aspect Hypothesis.

**Study 3: Investigating Distributions of Temporal Markings in L2 Learners’ Input**

The previous two studies showed that L2 learners who were not consistently sensitive to the L2 lexical aspect still had a use of temporal markers across aspectual classes in the target language. Then, what are the factors that motivate the learners to use temporal inflections in a way predicated by the Aspect Hypothesis? A probable account is the input. According to the Distributional Bias Hypothesis (Andersen, 1988), native speakers, like language learners, might also restrict the use of a temporal marking to a particular type of verbs when they interact with other native speakers. Therefore, when language learners are exposed to the language used by native speakers, it is no wonder that these learners would “initially interpret this skewed distribution of forms as an absolute characteristic of the forms themselves” (Andersen, 1990, p. 58). In this study, the purpose was to test the Distributional Bias Hypothesis and see if L2 learners’ distribution of temporal morphemes was influenced by the input addressed to them.

The temporal markings examined here were from the English textbooks used by senior high students in Taiwan. To compare the results of this study to those of Study 1, we only examined the temporal markings used with the same twenty-four verbs (or predicates) again. Totally, from the textbooks, 737 tokens of verbs were collected, including 439 states, 91 activities, 36 accomplishments, and 171 achievements. Tables 6-9 below show the tokens and percentages of them used in past tense and progressive aspect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6. Temporal Markings Used with STATIVE Verbs*
Based on the data shown above, in L2 learners’ input, there was a distribution of temporal markers similar to that in language learners’ use. Specifically, it was found that telic verbs (accomplishments and achievements) were significantly used in past tense more often (72% and 58%, respectively) than states and activities (26% and 25%, separately) and activity verbs did receive much more progressive inflections (25%) than states (3%), accomplishments (8%), and achievements (5%). This distribution suggests that learners could be simply producing the same distribution of temporal markings for specific verbs that they encounter in their input and lead us to believe that L2 learners should be influenced by their input, rather than awareness of lexical aspect, when they used L2 temporal inflections.

### Conclusion

The present research reported here was the first study to indicate the paradox implied in the central claim of the Aspect Hypothesis. As mentioned earlier, there is actually a paradox in the hypothesis. That is, although the Aspect Hypothesis claims that both L1 and L2 learners are influenced by lexical aspect when the learners use temporal markings with verbs, there is a strong possibility that L2 learners are not consistently sensitive to the relevant semantic properties of L2 verbs. This paradox has been confirmed by the corpus study and the lexical aspect tests in the Study 2. Accordingly, Study 3 was conducted to show that L2 learners’ input had a similar and less absolute distribution of tense-aspect markers across aspectual classes. This finding explains why L2 learners use tense-aspect markers to mark for verbal lexical while they are not sensitive to lexical aspectual classes of verbs.
In fact, in the recent few years, some researchers have started to question L2 learners’ accessibility to the sensitivity to L2 lexical aspect. For instance, Lardiere (2003) indicated “L2ers’ lexical semantic representations of verbs in the target language are often non-nativelike and may reflect properties of the L1, especially in the early stages of acquisition” (p. 139). However, so far, only few studies have been done to examine L2 learners’ awareness of lexical aspect. More experiments are thus expected to investigate this topic and it is hoped that more reliable methods can be proposed to test whether L2 learners are sensitive to the aspectual classes of verbs in the future.

Reference


