

Chapter Three Experimental Design

The present study intends to examine the use of the English present perfect by Taiwanese EFL learners in the high school stage, and find out what meaning(s) of the present perfect may cause the greatest confusion, and what tenses students misuse for present perfect. The results are hoped to reflect the flaws in the English present perfect instruction and provide EFL/ESL teachers some suggestions in teaching this form. This chapter will start with the research hypotheses of the present study, and then reveal the design derived from the hypotheses, including its subjects and methodology.

3.1 Research Hypotheses

This study investigates high school students' familiarity with the various uses of the English present perfect. From the meanings and functions of this form, the observations of its acquisition in the first language, and the characteristics of Chinese, several hypotheses are made concerning the acquisition of the present perfect in the ESL/EFL. More specifically, the present study attempts to test the following hypotheses:

1. The present perfect is a cognitively and functionally complex form in comparison with the simple past; therefore, learners' overall performance of the present perfect will reflect its difficulty:

- (a) The accuracy rate of the simple past will be higher than that of the present perfect.
 - (b) When learners misuse other tenses in place of the present perfect, they tend to use the most similar but less marked simple past.
 - (c) Learners are less familiar with the discourse function of the present perfect for they mainly encounter this form at sentence level.
2. The four functions of the present perfect – ‘continuative perfect’, ‘experiential perfect’, ‘resultative perfect’, and ‘perfect of recent past’ are acquired at different rates by Chinese learners, due to the different degrees of conceptual saliency proved in the L1 acquisition:
- (a) Learners will grasp the use of ‘continuative perfect’ and ‘experiential perfect’ earlier because the two functions are more cognitively salient and introduced as prototypes in the junior high school textbook, thus the performance will not be significantly divergent between the two groups due to this early acquisition.
 - (b) Learners of higher proficiency will show better performance in using ‘resultative perfect’ and ‘perfect of recent past’.
 - (c) Learners will tend to use simple past in the ‘recent past’ contexts due to the interchangeability of the present perfect and simple past in such

contexts in American English.

3. Learners' performance of the present perfect reflects interference from their first language. Learners will refer to the Chinese aspectual markers for similar meanings when using the English present perfect. In addition, influenced by prolific use of temporal adverbials in Chinese, learners will rely on the additional temporal adverbial phrases in the English contexts:

(a) Learners perform better on the functions that Chinese aspectual markers

le and *guo* share with the English present perfect, i.e. 'recent past' over the 'continuative', 'experiential' and 'resultative' functions.

(b) There is a negative transfer on the use where Chinese aspects and

English present perfect differ, in terms of the use of temporal adverbials and verb features.

(c) Learners will use present perfect more accurately where there is a

temporal adverbial, such as *since*, *for*, *already*, *ever*, and *yet*.

(d) They will overuse present perfect with the presence of such adverbials,

even though other tenses are preferred.

(e) Learners of higher proficiency will have better performance in the

contexts without adverbials.

4. Owing to the inadequate understanding of the complicated present perfect,

learners may avoid using this form in their spontaneous writing.

3.2 Subjects

There were two groups of subjects participating in this study, covering the first graders and the third graders in the senior high school. One group consisted of 68 third-year students at Taipei Municipal Xi-Song Senior High School and Taipei County Hai-Shan Senior High School, with an average of 6.7 years of English learning experience. The other group consisted of 75 first-year students at Taipei Municipal Xi-Song Senior High School and Taipei County Hai-Shan Senior High School, with an average of 4.8 years of English learning experience. The selection of the students from senior high school was based on the consideration that they were exposed to more input of the English present perfect than the junior high school students. Since this form is introduced late, in the third year of the junior high school, learners at this stage have rare further exposure to it in the following texts. Their knowledge of the present perfect thus is petty and insufficient to reveal the nature of the form.

3.3 Method

Results of the present perfect usage were collected through a blank-filling test and a writing task (Appendix One). The blank-filling test was composed of 57 blanks, 36 of which are located in dialogues, 21 in narrations. The design of dialogues was

based on that a speaker's pragmatic consideration is often better revealed in the interlocutions, and the pragmatic function is usually a main concern in using the present perfect. For each question item, subjects were free to use whatever tense they thought appropriate. The writing task asked subjects to write a paragraph about a person they admired.

The purpose of adopting the blank-filling test was to investigate learners' knowledge of using the present perfect for different functions. To look at the familiarity of the learners with the different uses of the English present perfect, questions eliciting the continuative perfect, experiential perfect, resultative perfect, and perfect of the recent past were distributed randomly in the blank-filling test; the categorization followed Huddleston and Pullum's (2003). The test instruction did not give the subjects hints to answer in certain tenses because the test was hoped to find out what tenses learners most often misuse for present perfect. However, such elicitation could not fully reflect students' acquisition of the English present perfect. Therefore, the writing task was expected to disclose students' knowledge of the form in spontaneous use.

3.3.1 Instruments

The content of the blank-filling test is discussed in greater detail here. In the blank-filling test (Appendix One), there were 37 potential places for the present

perfect, 10 for simple past. The latter group meant to check learner's performance of the less marked simple past comparing with the more marked present perfect. In addition, in order to eliminate the shadow effect, 8 items were included in the test as distracters. Still there were 2 blanks for simple present, which were included to test whether the subjects could make correct judgment at seeing adverbial '*for*'. Among the 37 items for present perfect, 11 were of the use of continuative, 11 of experiential, 10 of resultative, and 5 of recent past. The disproportion of the first three functions to 'perfect of recent past' reflected the frequency of occurrence in American English. Table 5 illustrates the allocation of test items for each testing category:

Category	Item	Number
Continuative Perfect	7, 9, 10, 17, 25, 36, 37, 39, 45, 46, 55	11
Experiential Perfect	1, 3, 4, 13, 15, 26, 33, 35, 41, 48, 57	11
Resultative Perfect	14, 16, 21, 27, 29, 32, 38, 50, 53, 54	10
Perfect of Recent Past	6, 12, 20, 28, 49	5
Simple Past	8, 18, 19, 22, 40, 42, 43, 47, 51, 52	10
Simple Present	5, 34	2
Present Perfect with Adverbials	1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 15, 17, 21, 25, 27, 33, 39, 46, 48, 50, 57 (overlapped)	(16)
Other Tenses with Adverbials	5, 19, 22, 34, 52 (overlapped)	(5)
Possible Negative Transfer	25, 46 (overlapped)	(2)
Discourse Function	50, 54 (overlapped)	(2)
Distracters	2, 11, 23, 24, 30, 31, 44, 56	8
Total		57

Table 5: Allocation of test items for each category

On the test sheets given to the subjects, Chinese equivalents were provided for difficult words in order to avoid the possibility of misjudgment resulting from failure to understand the language.

3.3.2 Test Administration

The blank-filling test was given separately from the writing task in order to avoid the shadow effect. The blank-filling test was administered in 40 minutes and the

writing 30 minutes. The subjects sensed that the test meant to examine their use of English tenses, but did not exactly know it focused on the present perfect since other tenses and the distracters were provided.

3.4 Design of the Test

This section introduces the design of the test items and explains how they map onto the research hypotheses.

3.4.1 Cognitive and Functional Complexity

The first hypothesis predicted that learners would perform better in the simple past, for this form is cognitively simpler than present perfect. If learners fail to use present perfect, they would most likely use simple past because this form shares most features with present perfect yet is less marked. Hence, subjects were supposed to answer the following items with higher accuracy:

Mrs. Yang: Yeah! I (8) _____ <hear> of that in the evening news.

Teacher: You (18) _____ <miss> two English classes just last week!

Grandpa: I (19) _____ <already, eat> earlier. It tastes good,
doesn't it?

Husband: Oh I haven't noticed that. How much (22) _____ <we,
spend> for last month then?

Coal(煤) (40) _____ <seem> an acceptable source until people

became aware of its polluting quality.

The boy (42)_____ <throw> a carrier bag at the shopkeeper and
ordered her to fill it up.

“I don’t know whether he (43)_____ <want> me to fill the bag with
sweets or money,” said the shopkeeper.

Four years ago, I think. We (47) _____ <go> to Natalie’s wedding.

“Crouched Tiger, Hidden Dragon(臥虎藏龍)” aroused(引起) Americans’ interest
in the martial art(武術), and the following Kungfu movies all (51)
_____ <achieve> good box office(票房).

But the heat (52) _____ <cool> down for a long time because there
were no Kungfu movies as impressive shown in Hollywood.

Besides, the present perfect also plays more functions than the simple past.

One of them is the discourse function. The discourse functions can be found in some
text types, such as news reports, letters to the editor, biography, and obituary (Zydatiss,
1986; cited in McCarthy, 1991); however, these text types were not familiar to the
Chinese learners at the high school stage. Therefore, they might fail to use present
perfect in the blanks below:

Chinese Kungfu(功夫) (50) _____ <gain> popularity in the U.S. lately.

Harry Potter's magic (54) _____ <touch> a huge audience of all ages

all over the world.

3.4.2 Uses of the Present Perfect

The second research hypothesis predicts learners' performance discrepancy in the different uses of the present perfect. The acquisition rates of the four functions of the present perfect – 'continuative', 'experiential', 'resultative', and 'recent past' are not the same in the first language due to the different cognitive and functional load each carries. It was predicted that the same phenomenon would be found in the second language acquisition. When the functions are salient, Chinese learners of English are assumed to acquire them earlier. Thus, they were predicted to perform better in 'continuative' and 'experiential' perfect. Moreover, these two uses are introduced first in the textbook and receive more attention. As to the less salient functions, i.e. 'resultative perfect' and 'perfect of recent past', learners' performance was expected to improve as their proficiency grew. With continuous exposure to present perfect in their contact with English, they would get hold of the different uses of the present perfect. Consequently, the accuracy rate would be improved in the group of third graders, particularly on the items of 'resultative perfect'. As for 'perfect of recent past', because it is interchangeable with simple past and therefore occur less often in American English, learners would tend to use simple past in the items for 'recent past'.

Continuative perfect

This category was supposed to have higher accuracy rate:

Painter: A lot of people (7) _____ <ask> about it, and I always say
it's not for sale.

Miss Yu: Well, I (9) _____ <keep> those secrets for a lifetime. I
think it's time to let go.

Young man: Don't tell me you (10) _____ <live> so far without
using one.

Teacher: You'd better not be absent from class again for the rest of the
term(學期). You (17) _____ <already, miss> too many
classes.

#David: No, Sir! I (25) _____ <finish> for a long time. Here it is.

Interviewer: I have never been to any of those countries. I (36) _____
<always, want> to travel to those places.

For example, the contents of libraries (37) _____ <change> greatly
through the years.

Since the discovery of electricity, there (39) _____ <be> a debate(爭論)
about how to generate(產生) the electricity we need.

I think the beard suits him because he (45) _____ <lose> a lot of hair

in the past few years.

Can you believe that, we (46) _____ <graduate> for ten years!

They (55) _____ <be translated(翻譯)> into 61 languages and distributed in over 200 countries.

Experiential perfect

Learners were also predicted to be more familiar with this use:

George: Hi, Jill. Welcome to my birthday party. (1) _____
<you, ever, meet> my cousin?

Dan: It sucks(令人討厭)! I (3) _____ <write> to them three times,
but I still haven't received a reply.

Wife: Well, I (4) _____ <never, try> rabbit meat. I think I'll order
that.

Security guard: Ma'am, you'd better be careful. There (13) _____
<be> three cases of missing children this week.

Student A: (15) _____ <you, take> any English test recently?

Tour guide: Look! This is the oldest tree in the town. It (26) _____
<survive> many typhoons and now is still flourishing(茂盛).

Wendy: I (33) _____ <never, wait> so desperately(絕望地).

Interviewer: What countries (35) _____ <you, visit>?

So we (41) _____ <not, find> an ideal way to generate power.

I (48) _____ <never, be> there before and I don't want to get lost and
be late.

The author J. K. Rowling (57) _____ <win> many prizes and awards
so far.

Resultative perfect

Subjects were assumed to answer this category with lower accuracy because the
actions of past happenings do not continue to the present, only the states do.

Therefore, this function is less salient as the former two. But learners of higher
proficiency were supposed to show improvement in this use.

#Camille: Fine. Well, Sam, I hope you (14) _____ <forgive(原諒)>
me now about that day.

Student B: I don't know. I (16) _____ <not, get> the result.

Wife: Gee! The prices of commodities(日用品) have gone up! We (21)
_____ <spend> NT\$ 12,000 on groceries(食品雜貨) this
month already!

Husband: (27) _____ <your sister, arrive> yet?

Sister-in-law: Yeah, you too, Chris. I am on a diet, and guess what! I (29)
_____ <lose> 2 kilos in one week! Everyone says I
am in a perfect shape.

Andrew: I don't think so. We (32) _____ <not, have> much rain
this year. The river may be too thin for rafting.

However, today most libraries (38) _____ <become> multimedia(多媒
體) centers that contain books, tapes, computers, films, magazines, and
paintings.

Chinese Kungfu(功夫) (50) _____ <gain> popularity in the U.S. lately.

Actors like Jackie Chen(成龍), Jet Li(李連杰), and even Stephen Chow(周星馳)
(53) _____ <make> Kungfu shine in the West again.

Harry Potter's magic (54) _____ <touch> a huge audience of all ages
all over the world.

Perfect of recent past

This use has the least occurrences in American English and thus not salient to
learners. As a result, subjects tended to use simple past in this category even though
they were expected to grasp this function with the growth of English proficiency:

Nancy: What's the matter? Your eyes are red and watery. (6) _____
<you, just, cry>?

Woman: Oh! Thank God! Where (12) _____ <you, be>, Timmy?
I've been looking for you like crazy!

Louis: But I (20) _____ <just, finish> one. Well, doctor said I

needed to cut back caffeine(咖啡因) intake.

Wife: Yes, she is already here. She (28) _____ <just, get> our
home. Marty!

She (49) _____ <just, move> there and is having a party to celebrate.

3.4.3 L1 Interference

Since Chinese aspect markers *le* and *guo* are related to the English present perfect and overlap all the four functions, these uses are assumed to be noticeable to Chinese learners of English. However, in Chinese, additional temporal adverbials are also used to locate the events. To decode the temporal reference, Chinese speakers rely on both the aspectual markers and the adverbials. Without such hints in an English context, Chinese learners may be less certain about the tenses/aspects appropriate to use. Moreover, verb types used for the ‘continuative perfect’ contexts and the ‘resultative perfect’ ones are not mutually excluded in Chinese, that is, an instantaneous verb can be used together with a duration of time, simply under the influence of *le* in the meaning of ‘change of state’. Such usage is not applicable in English, and it is likely that Chinese learners carry this use to the English contexts without being aware. In the following items, learners were predicted to show negative transfer of L1:

David: No, Sir! I (25) _____ <finish> for a long time. Here it is.

Can you believe that, we (46) _____ <graduate> for ten years!

As noted, additional temporal markers in the English contexts may help learners to make judgment on the appropriate tenses. Since the present perfect is a more difficult tense-aspect for Chinese learners, they will heavily rely on the adverbials like *for*, *since*, *ever*, and *never* when using this form. Hence, the accuracy rate was expected to be higher when such adverbials appeared in the contexts. Moreover, due to learners' association of these adverbials with the present perfect, they were assumed to overuse present perfect in the items with them. However, as the proficiency grows, learners are predicted to reduce their dependence on the temporal adverbials:

Present perfect with adverbials

Subjects were expected to answer these items more accurately:

George: Hi, Jill. Welcome to my birthday party. (1) _____ <you, ever, meet> my cousin?

Dan: It sucks(令人討厭)! I (3) _____ <write> to them three times, but I still haven't received a reply.

Wife: Well, I (4) _____ <never, try> rabbit meat. I think I'll order that.

Miss Yu: Well, I (9) _____ <keep> those secrets for a lifetime. I

think it's time to let go.

Young man: Don't tell me you (10) _____ <live> thus far without
using one.

Student A: (15) _____ <you, take> any English test recently?

Teacher: You'd better not be absent from class again for the rest of the term(學
期). You (17) _____ <already, miss> too many classes.

Wife: We (21) _____ <spend> NT\$ 12,000 on groceries(食品雜貨)
this month already!

David: No, Sir! I (25) _____ <finish> for a long time. Here it is.

Husband: (27) _____ <your sister, arrive> yet?

Wendy: I (33) _____ <never, wait> so desperately(絕望地).

Since the discovery of electricity, there (39) _____ <be> a debate(爭論)
about how to generate(產生) the electricity we need.

Can you believe that, we (46) _____ <graduate> for ten years!

I (48) _____ <never, be> there before and I don't want to get lost and
be late.

Chinese Kungfu(功夫) (50) _____ <gain> popularity in the U.S. lately.

The author J. K. Rowling (57) _____ <win> many prizes and awards
so far.

Other tenses with adverbials

Subjects were predicted to overuse present perfect for the following items though a simple past or a simple present was required:

Son: It's boring! Grandma (5) _____ <talk> about trivia(瑣事) for hours every time, no matter I am interested or not.

Grandpa: I (19) _____ <already, eat> earlier. It tastes good, doesn't it?

Husband: Oh I haven't noticed that. How much (22) _____ <we, spend> for last month then?

Interviewee: Yes, I like to travel. I (34) _____ <travel> for a month every year.

But the heat (52) _____ <cool> down for a long time because there were not Kungfu movies as impressive shown in Hollywood.

3.4.4 Performance in Writing

Taiwanese students often receive the language instruction in a passive way, and their acquisition is usually assessed through elicitation tests. Consequently, they are both less comfortable with and weaker at the spontaneous production. It was assumed that students tended to avoid using present perfect in the writing task.

3.5 Correction of Tests

For the blank-filling test, the errors of the past participle form of verbs were ignored. As long as subjects put in *have/has* with verb inflections, they were considered attempting to use present perfect. So learners' insufficient knowledge of verb inflections were not deemed as their disability to apply present perfect. Those items served as distracters were disregarded and excluded from the later analysis.

For the writing task, the instruction implied that some descriptions contained the meanings the present perfect coded, like duration and experience. Therefore, the following ideas were expected to be in the present perfect in learners' writings:

I *have been* a fan of XXX for two years.

I *have seen* him in person.

I *have got* all his albums.

I *have been* to all his concerts.

He *has made* me love R&B.

If the subjects failed to use present perfect, or they paraphrased these ideas with other tenses, they were regarded as avoiding using it. A native speaker from Canada helped to identify the clauses which required the use of present perfect. Subjects' use of other tenses was deemed as their preference in the spontaneous production.