

Chapter Two Literature Review

This chapter reviews literature on the meanings and functions of the English present perfect, and its acquisition by first language learners as well as EFL/ESL learners. Section 2.1 examines studies on the various meanings the present perfect carries and the functions it serves. Section 2.2 looks at works on the acquisition of the present perfect in L1. Section 2.3 reviews researches on how English present perfect is acquired by EFL/ESL learners of various L1 backgrounds.

2.1 Meanings and Functions of the Present Perfect

This section looks at the English present perfect from the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse views, and compares its similarities and differences with the preterite to explicate why the preterite is so often misused for the present perfect.

2.1.1 Semantic View

The most salient feature that the present perfect carries is its meaning of “current relevance.” Present perfect is used when describing an event, which began at an indefinite time in the past, and continues to the speech moment. Dowty (1979) explains perfect as “...serving to locate an event within a period of time that began in the past and extends up to the present moment.” Leech (1971), McCawley (1971), McCoard (1978), and Suh (1992) define the English present perfect in a similar sense (cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2001).

From this feature, linguists have induced different functions which present perfect performs. McCawley (1971) proposes four functions of the present perfect:

(A) Universal: to indicate that a state of affairs prevails throughout some interval stretching from the past to the present, as illustrated in (1).

(1) *I've known* Max since 1960.

(B) Existential: to indicate the existence of past events.

(2) *I have read Principia Mathematica* five times.

(C) Stative: to indicate that the direct effect of a past event still continues.

(3) I can't come to your party – *I've caught* the flu.

(D) Hot news: to report hot news.

(4) Malcolm X *has just been* assassinated.

However, this categorization shows certain degree of overlapping. As pointed out by Inoue (1979), the stative sense is identical to the universal one, for it indicates that the state obtains continuously from the past to the present. Moreover, McCawley himself suggests that the hot news sense differs in no substantial way from the existential sense regarding the time of the occurrence of the event itself (1971: 109, cited in Inoue, 1979). However, the situations in which these four functions are applied still differ, though maybe slightly.

Leech and Svartvik (1975) also categorize the uses of the present perfect into the

following four functions:

(A) State leading up to the present time

(5) That house *has been* empty for ages.

(B) Indefinite events in a period leading up to the present time

(6) *Have you ever been* to Florence?

(C) Habit in a period leading up to the present time

(7) He *has attended* lectures regularly this term.

(D) Past event with results in the present time

(8) Her doll *has been* broken. (It's still not mended)

Upon close examination, however, all the four functions are derived from the current relevance of the present perfect. Function (A) – state leading up to the present time – corresponds to McCawley's 'universal' function; Function (B) – indefinite events in a period leading up to the present time – codes the meaning of 'existential'; Function (D) – past event with results in the present time – can be mapped onto McCawley's 'stative' function. Only Function (C) – habit in a period leading up to the present time – brings in new idea about the present perfect. Thus, three functions out of Leech and Svartvik's categorization may be regarded as restatements of McCawley's first three senses.

Comrie (1976) also comes up with four functions for the present perfect, slightly

different from McCawley's:

(A) The perfect of persistent situation: a habit or a repetition of an event up to the present moment.

(9) She *has practised* law for several years.

(B) The experiential perfect: a past event in an indefinite time.

(10) I know I've *seen* you somewhere before.

(C) The perfect of result: the action of the verb results in an outcome which is still in effect at the present moment.

(11) I've *finished* my homework.

(D) The perfect of recent past

(12) I *have just blown* a tyre.

Comrie's categories resemble those of McCawley's and Leech and Svartvik's substantially. 'Perfect of persistent situation' in his system has the shadow of Leech and Svartvik's 'habit in a period leading up to the present time'; 'experiential perfect' corresponds to McCawley's existential perfect and Leech and Svartvik's indefinite events in period leading up to the present time; and 'perfect of result' is identical to McCawley's stative sense and Leech and Svartvik's past event with results in the present time. The idea of recent past has less obvious connection with the present. A closer examination, however, shows that the sense is closer to the nature of indefinite

past of the present perfect (Brown, 1973; Leech, 1970; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973; cited in Johnson, 1985), and less the current relevance. In its realization in the real world, events happening in the recent past are likely to become “hot news” in McCawley’s term, and thus may be regarded as the same category.

Huddleston and Pullum (2003) examine the major uses of the present perfect in the English grammar and provide a more concise and inclusive categorization: “continuative perfect”, “experiential perfect”, “resultative perfect”, and “perfect of recent past.” The definition of “continuative perfect” covers the “universal” (McCawley, 1971), “state leading up to the present time” and “habit in a period leading up to the present time” (Leech and Svartvik, 1975), and “perfect of persistent situation” (Comrie, 1976). Their “experiential perfect” corresponds to “existential” in McCawley’s interpretation (1971), “indefinite events in a period leading up to the present time” in Leech and Svartvik (1975), and “experiential” in Comrie (1976). The “resultative perfect” restates McCawley’s “stative” (1971), Leech and Svartvik’s “past event with results in the present time “ (1975), and Comrie’s “perfect of result” (1976). Finally, their “perfect of the recent past” reflects McCawley’s “hot news” (1971), and Comrie’s “perfect of recent past” (1976). Since Huddleston and Pullum’s categorization is more comprehensive and concise, the present study will adopt theirs. The four categorizations and the corresponding functions are illustrated

in Table 1.

Linguist	Functions of present perfect				
McCawley (1971)	universal	existential	stative	hot news	
Leech and Svartvik (1975)	state leading up to the present time	indefinite events in a period leading up to the present time	past event with results in the present time		habit in a period leading up to the present time
Comrie (1976))		experiential	perfect of result	perfect of recent past	perfect of persistent situation
Huddleston and Pullum (2003)	continuative	experiential	resultative	recent past	continuative

Table. 1 Functions of present perfect

With its basic meaning of signaling current relevance, the present perfect is used when a past event has connection to the present in some way. Yet the event described in present perfect may be non-continuative or continuative (Huddleston and Pullum, 2003). The feature “non-continuative” suggests that the present perfect can locate the time referred to (T_r) wholly before the time of orientation (T_o), while the feature “continuative” indicates that an event begins earlier and extends to include the time of orientation (T_o). Compare the examples below:

(A) Non-continuative (T_r wholly before T_o)

(13) He *has lived* here before.

(14) He *lived* here last year.

(B) Continuative (T_r before and up to T_o)

(15) He *has lived* here ever since.

(16) *He *lived* here ever since.

Examples (13) and (14) show that both perfect and preterite may have the non-continuative reading, which means the whole event is over prior to the present. This use of the present perfect is more frequent, and can be seen as its default function (Huddleston and Pullum, 2003). This characteristic can be seen from the categories mentioned above in that three out of their four categories describe events finished before the present moment (experiential, resultative, and recent past). Example (15) illustrates that perfect also yields the continuative reading: the situation continues throughout the period. The preterite, on the other hand, cannot yield this reading, as illustrated in (16). Thus the preterite only codes simple anteriority, since it has only the non-continuative reading, while the present perfect codes complex anteriority, covering non-continuative and continuative readings. Huddleston and Pullum (2003) thus claim that the basic use of the perfect is to express complex anteriority, while the preterite is to express simple anteriority.

Though not as salient as “current relevance”, “indefinite past” is also one of the features that present perfect carries. Because the focus falls on the present when the

present perfect is used, the definite point of event time in the past is not the concern (Walker, 1967). As Huddleston and Pullum (2003) put it, the present perfect is non-deictic; on the contrary, the preterite has a deictic T_0 , in which a precise time is usually indicated.

2.1.2 Pragmatic View

A major pragmatic feature associated with the perfect is the judgment of relevance of the information by the speaker (Givon, 1993). In the semantic sense, the present perfect codes an event prior to the reference point, which is identical with the speech moment. In the pragmatic sense, when the speaker marks an event with the present perfect, he/she decides on his/her perspective of the relevance about the event: the event is relevant at the speech moment. Although in the case of the present perfect the relevance point equals the reference point, relevance takes on the speaker's own judgment toward the event. With reference time, the event is viewed objectively; however, with relevance time, the speaker's subjectivity is put into to make the judgment. For example:

(17) Breast cancer *has become* the Top 1 killer to the Taiwanese women.

(18) (Teacher to class) Good afternoon! Your exam results *have arrived*.

The use of the present perfect in (17) simply represents a current state; while in the situation of (18), the present perfect is chosen because the speaker would wish to

draw hearers' attention to the present situation (Kałuza, 1983). Therefore, the present perfect in Example (18) takes on a pragmatic function.

Bardovi-Harlig (2001) also sees the present perfect as being used to show the orientation of the speaker towards past events. The speaker's concern on the event itself or on the current result influences his/her choice of the tense form. For instance, there are two ways to express the same event as follow:

(18) a. Now where did I put my glasses?

b. Now where have I put my glasses?

The simple past is used in (18a) when the speaker's attention is fixed on the moment when he lost his glasses (the underlying reading: 'What did I do at that time?'), while when the present perfect is used, as in (18b), his/her attention turns to the present result (the underlying reading: 'Where are they now?') (Kałuza, 1983). That is to say, the speaker's relevance point decides his/her focus on an event. Fig. 1 and 2 illustrates the relation between event time, relevance time, and speech time in the present perfect and the simple past respectively:

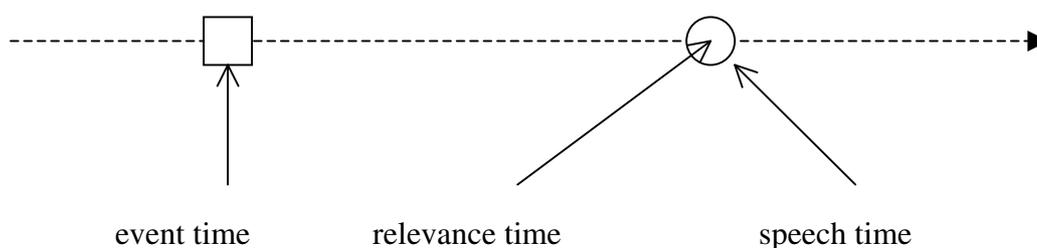


Fig. 1 Pragmatic interpretation of the present perfect (Givon 1993: 166)

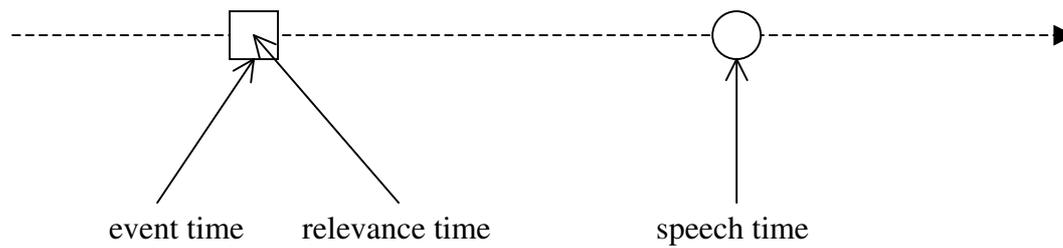


Fig. 2 Pragmatic interpretation of the simple past (Givon 1993: 165)

Also, when using the present perfect, usually the speaker does not concern about locating a past event at a specific point of time (Walker, 1967), but wants to show that it continues to have some kind of importance at the present moment (Tregidgo, 1984).

Compare examples (19) and (20):

(19) I brought / have brought you a cup of coffee.

(20) Bill was / has been in Africa for a long time.

The use of the present perfect in (19) and (20) extends the past actions to the speech moment and thus draws hearer's attention to the present result. Yet the preterite readings simply state those happenings in the past.

2.1.3 Discourse View

The present perfect is typically used in certain positions in discourse and in certain discourse types, mainly because of its core meaning of 'current relevance'. When something has current relevance, it usually becomes the focus and draws much

attention. Thus undoubtedly, a common position that present perfect occurs is the topic position, that is, the topic sentence. As McCawley (1971) and Inoue (1979) point out, *topic* is directly related to current relevance, and refers to a discourse proposition about which the speaker is either providing or requesting new information.

Zydatiss (1986) observes that the present perfect serves three functions in certain text types, all encoding current relevance: conveying 'hot news', expressing experiences, and relating to present effects of changes and accomplishments. These functions account for the prevalence of the present perfect in certain text types. The following examples illustrate the functions:

(A) Conveying 'hot news'

The function to convey 'hot news' are generally applied in news reports to provide new information. An example from British television news illustrates the point:

(21) Health officials *have tentatively identified* an Anchorage cook as the source of the food poisoning outbreak that struck 144 passengers on a Japan Airlines flight in Copenhagen Monday.

All but one of the pieces in the epidemiologic jigsaw puzzle *have been assembled*, leaving little doubt in the investigators' mind that the cook spread staphylococcal bacteria as he handled Danish canned ham.... (New York Times, Feb. 7, 1975)

The present perfect serves the function of bringing up the latest finding about the investigation, that is, the person who should be responsible for the food poisoning, to

the readers. This is the strategy to present the most noteworthy information and to attract readers' attention. From the report, it is also observed that the present perfect takes the topic position while the detail that follows shifts to simple past. In hot news texts, the present perfect usually contrasts with the simple past; the topicalized sentence often uses the present perfect to highlight the events, and the narrative uses simple past to provide details.

(B) Expressing experiences

The function of the present perfect to express experiences, similar to that of conveying hot news, puts the events under the spotlight. For instance:

(22) Einstein *has visited* Princeton. In fact, when he first came, I was still a freshman at the university.

The more important purpose of (22) is to emphasize Einstein's visit. So this point is expressed in the present perfect. The rest remarks about the speaker himself are expressed in the simple past.

(C) Relating to present effects of changes and accomplishments

Topics using present perfect for 'relating to present effects of changes and accomplishments' also start with present perfect to make a frame, and the tense shifts to simple past when going to the narration. For example:

(23) Life in my country *has changed* quite a bit since my grandmother's time.

My grandparents, like most people at that time, lived and worked on a farm....

In Zydatiss's observation, the functions of the present perfect as expressing experiences, changes and accomplishments are frequently found in texts like 'letters to the editor' and 'agony column' letters (cited in McCarthy, 1991, 59-60).

2.1.4 Comparison of the Simple Past and the Present Perfect

Learners of English frequently confuse the present perfect with the simple past. In Bardovi-Harlig's observation of the emergence of the present perfect in ESL learners' language use (2001), most of the overgeneralizations are uses of the present perfect in the environment of the simple past, and also the past used in present perfect environment. The phenomenon implies that learners strongly associate the past with present perfect. Indeed, the present perfect and the past share quite some similar qualities. They are similar in that their basic meanings both express the temporal relation of anteriority (Huddleston and Pullum, 2003), and also the feature of perfectivity; that is, an event has been terminated or accomplished before the reference time (Givon, 1993). Furthermore, since they both refer to events happening earlier, the present perfect and the simple past also share the feature of truth value (Inoue, 1979, and N. V. Smith, 1981), or *realis*. This semantic overlapping makes the association of the present perfect with the past strong, and explains the great extent of overuse in each other's contexts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001).

When we mean a happening taking place in the past with a definite time but not continuing to the present time, we use the past tense (Leech and Svartvik, 1975); it is described by Huddleston and Pullum (2003: 140) as deictically locating the time referred to as anterior to the speech moment. In contrast, the perfect aspect is used for a past happening which is seen in relation to a later event or time, and is normally non-deictic in Huddleston and Pullum's definition. It means past-time-related-to-present-time. Therefore, with the simple preterite the focus is on the past situation, while with the present perfect the focus is on the present. Compare (24a) and (24b):

- (24) a. He *was* in prison for ten years. (Now he's out)
 b. He *has been* in prison for ten years. (He's still in there)

The following figure is Reichenbach's representation (1947) of English present perfect and simple past, illustrating the relations of event time (E), reference time (R), and speech time (S), from which we can see the difference between the simple past and the present perfect:

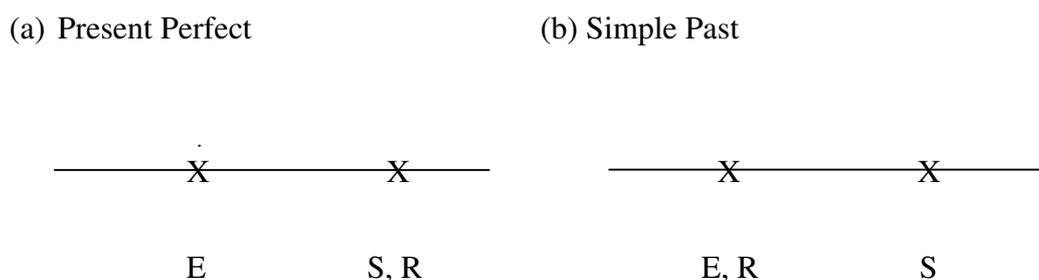


Fig. 3 Reichenbach's representation of tense aspect (cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2001)

The speech time is the moment of utterance, the event time is the moment the state or event occurs, and the reference time is the time point the speaker judges relevant for depicting the event. When a speaker uses (a) present perfect, he/she views the past event related to the speech moment, so his/her reference point is identical to the speech moment. When he/she uses (b) simple past, he/she sees the event prior to, and having no connection to the speech moment. In this sense, the present perfect and the simple past share the anterior event time, but not the reference time (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001)

As mentioned in previous sections, the use of the present perfect also takes the pragmatic perspective. It shows the orientation of the speaker towards past events, described by Smith as “viewpoint” (1983, cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Examples (25a) and (25b) can illustrate the difference between the expressions through the present perfect and the simple past:

(25) a. I have studied English for six years.

b. I studied English for six years.

The present perfect in (25a) allows the speaker to see him/herself as able to repeat or re-engage in the study, whereas (25b) does not. The same holds true for the negative of the present perfect:

(26) a. I haven't finished it.

b. I didn't finish it.

In Example (26a), the present perfect suggests that the speaker sees him/herself as able to complete the goal, but the simple past in (26b) does not (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001).

The different functions of the present perfect and simple past also show in narrations. In a narration in the past tense, the events are ordered in a linear sequence:

(27) So I *went* up to my apartment, *got* him a bowl of soup, a sandwich and a cup of tea, and *brought* it down. I *set* it down and *walked* away. (Masset, 1989)

Contrarily, the use of the present perfect indicates that events are being reported out of sequence:

(28) It's hard to say where they've *gotten* this new drawing from. FBI agent Kennedy said they've *gotten* over 13,000 phone calls regarding John Doe No. 2, and they've *got* seven million pieces of information they're working on. He talked about this, some high-tech gadgetry they *have called* the "rapid start automated case support system", which is a database of over 30-million bits of information that they are using to correlate all of the evidence they've *been gathering*... (Goodwyn, 1995)

In Example (28), the events reported in the present perfect are not in order with respect to those reported in the simple past; they go prior to the events coded in simple past. Thus, the events marked in the present perfect stand out of the flow

of happenings. Givon (1993) calls this feature of the present perfect ‘counter-sequentiality’, which is not shared by the simple past.

Table 2 sums up the similarity and difference between the present perfect and the simple past:

Feature	Present Perfect	Simple Past
Anteriority (Huddleston and Pullum, 2003)	V	V
Perfectivity (Givon, 1993)	V	V
Truth value / Realis (Inoue, 1979; Smith, 1981)	V	V
Time-deictic* (Huddleston and Pullum, 2003)	X	V
Counter-sequentiality* (Givon, 1993)	V	X
Continuity (Smith, 1981)	V	X

Table 2. Similarity and difference between the present perfect and the simple past

* Sequentiality overlaps time-deixis in some sense. The use of simple past puts events in a linear sequence, which refers to a specific past time and thus is deictic. Since events coded in the present perfect jump out of the sequence of time, this form is non-deictic.

2.2 Acquisition of the Present Perfect in L1

Weist (1986) proposed that children go through four temporal systems along the development of the capacity to express increasingly complex concepts about time. The initial temporal system, known as the speech time system, is a here-and-now system. During this period the concept of event time (ET) and reference time (RT)

are frozen at the speech time (ST), which is the present moment. According to Antinucci and Miller (1976, cited in Weist, 1986), children in this period use past tense only when prior situations involve a change which remains physically present. They cannot specify a situation displaced in time as prior to speech time because they lack the abstract conception of time.

The second system, event time system, is featured by the children's capacity to represent ET prior to, subsequent to, and simultaneous with ST. Children break out the here-and-now constraints of the earlier stage, and can make the distinction between ongoing events and complete events relative to the speech time.

The concept of RT emerges in the child's third temporal system, but remains restricted. Hence, this stage is identified as 'restricted RT system'. Children have demonstrated the capacity to de-center, but they are still relating two points in time. They have not established RT at a point prior to or subsequent to ST simultaneously with ET as a third point. When RT is established other than the point of ST, ET is restricted to the RT context, not yet independent.

The final system is identified as the free reference time system, in which ST, ET, and RT represent three different points in time and can be related freely. At this time, children acquire the concept of the individuality of happenings. They can retrieve prior experiences from memory with the knowledge that these experiences occurred

prior to the speech time. They can also conceptualize an event which might occur subsequent to the speech time. The child's conceptual and linguistic development is illustrated in Figure. 4:

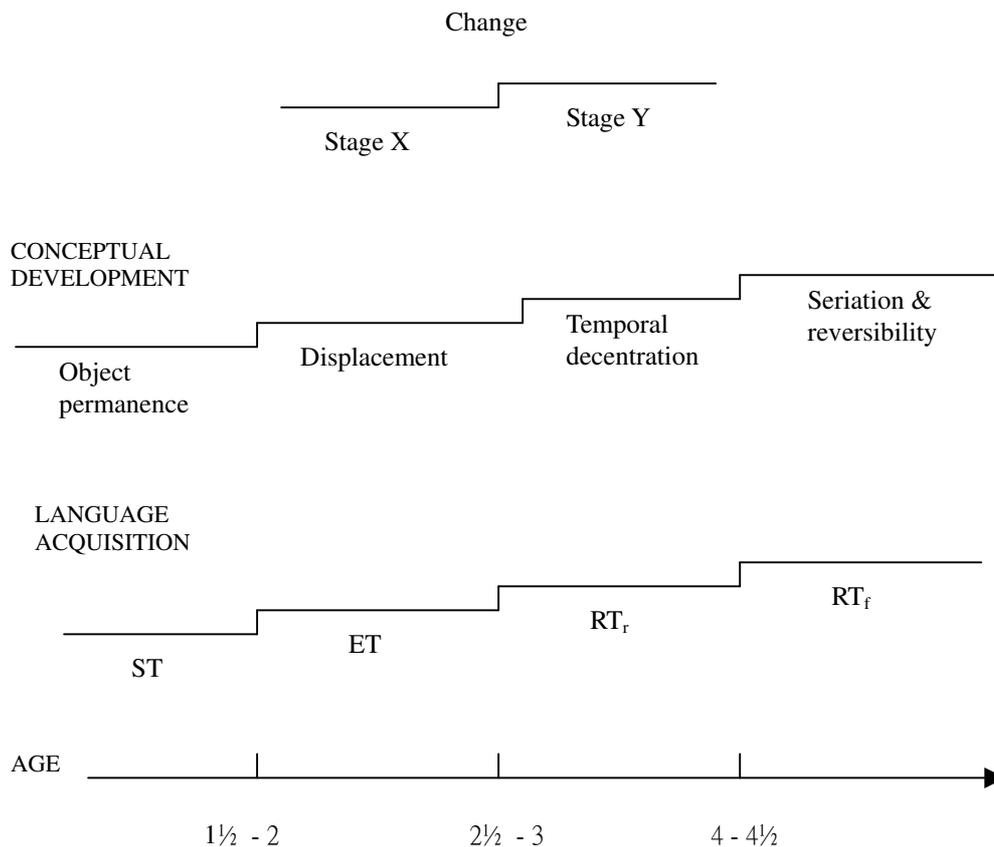


Fig. 4 Relationships between conceptual and linguistic development (Weist, 1986: 371)

As illustrated in Fig. 4, there are four stages in the conceptual development and language acquisition of a child. At the first stage, children's concept remains object permanence, corresponding to their language development of speech time system. Their knowledge of the world is frozen at here-and-now. This stage lasts till the age

of two. Then as children enter the cognitive stage of displacement, they also evolve to the stage of event time system. Here they can displace an event from the speech moment, and see ST and ET as two separate points in time. When children reach the age of three in average, they are in the cognitive stage of temporal decentration, and linguistically they also start to develop the knowledge of RT. But they still cannot perceive ST, ET, and RT as independent points. Though during this stage RT still remains restricted, children have made a great progress in the temporal concept. Finally, from the age four and beyond, children reach the cognitive stage of seriation and reversibility, and correspondingly develop a mature concept about time. They have the knowledge of separate ST, ET, and RT, and are able to make use of them freely.

The late acquisition of the present perfect is relevant to the late development of the concept of reference time. In the case of the present perfect, RT is simultaneous with ST while ET is prior to RT. In other words, the use of the present perfect requires a concept of RT independent of ST, and the capacity to establish ET and RT at different time points. Moreover, the present perfect does not merely place ET before RT. The prior situations must also have current relevance. In addition to such temporal complexity, present perfect codes more than one meaning, and also relies heavily on speakers' pragmatic intention. Such a complicated nature of the

present perfect naturally causes burden on learners' cognitive load and judgment in use.

Some reports indicate that children learning English as first language acquire the present perfect relatively late, ranging from 4 to 6 years of age (Cromer, 1968, 1971; Brown, 1973; de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973; Nussbaum & Naremore, 1975; cited in Gathercole, 1986), and the early use is highly constrained by lexical, semantic, and syntactic context (Fletcher 1979, 1981). Various explanations of this late acquisition have been given. Cromer (1968, 1971, 1976) and Kuczaj and Daly (1979) support the reason of its cognitive complexity. As mentioned earlier, not until children reach the fourth temporal system do they acquire the relation among ET, ST, and RT. However, this reason alone cannot fully account for the late acquisition of the present perfect because the contexts it applies to often overlap with those the past tense applies to, particularly when referring to events that occur immediately before ST and to states that are the results of past situation (Gathercole, 1986). Yet the past tense is early acquired in child's language (Brown, 1973), contrary to the present perfect.

The linguistic complexity theory views the late acquisition in another way. Gathercole (1986) notes that, a theory built on cognitive complexity predicts that when a child has a certain concept, he/she will use whatever linguistic device available in the input to refer to the concept. However, a theory built on linguistic

complexity predicts that once a child gains a certain concept, he/she will use the least marked linguistic form to refer to it. The more marked expression will develop later. In this case, the past is acquired prior to the present perfect.

Another explanation to the late acquisition of the present perfect arises from Fletcher's study (1981) on comparison of the British and American children's acquisition rate of the present perfect. Fletcher finds that the British children use the present perfect form earlier than their American counterparts, which might result from the more frequent use of the present perfect in British English. Thus, the frequency of input may play a major role in the acquisition. In order to confirm if the frequency of input is crucial to the acquisition rate of the present perfect, Gathercole conducts a similar study in 1986. The result of her experiment is congruent to Fletcher's conclusion, but she suggests some other possibilities that may lead to this result. First of all, present perfect and the past are more interchangeable in some contexts in American English (AE) than in Scottish English (SE); therefore children learning AE do not need to learn the present perfect, while those learning SE do. Secondly, the present perfect and the past may have subtle differences in SE when used in the same contexts. Thirdly, if there is minimal frequency of input necessary to make a form acquirable, this minimum level may be met for Scottish children in the case of present perfect but not yet for American children. The best explanation,

according to Gathercole, would be that frequency of input interacts with at least cognitive simplicity, relative syntactic simplicity, and functional load to influence the acquisition rate.

Among the uses of the present perfect, some are reported to be picked up earlier than others. In Gathercole's study (1986), the acquisition rate among the following listed uses are compared, as well as uses with adverbials like *yet*, with modals like 'must have', and under temporal conjunctions like *after*.

(A) Recent past

(29) Look what I have done!

(B) Perfect of result

(30) Where has the pen gone?

(C) Experiential perfect'

(31) Have you ever been to a circus?

(D) perfect of persistent situation

(32) We have not had that since I was three.

(E) have got

(33) I've got a ponytail today.

The uses of the present perfect defined in her study primarily correspond to Comrie's (1976), except that she adds a use of 'have got'. In the results, the earliest

acquired functions with Scottish children are 'have got' and 'recent past'. This suggests that frequent input, high functional load, cognitive and syntactic simplicity in combination facilitate the acquisition. The 'experiential perfect' also carries a higher functional load, but a lower frequency and greater cognitive complexity; as a consequence, it is used later. And then comes the 'perfect of result', which has similar features as 'recent past' and 'have got' but has lower frequency of use; therefore, the acquisition rate is delayed. On the other hand, the use of cognitively simpler 'perfect of recent past' is not acquired by the American children as early as the Scottish children, due to its interchangeability with the past in the same contexts in American English. The present perfect emerges in American children's speech in reference to experiential context, which results from a more frequent use of perfect in these contexts than the past.

2.3 Acquisition of the Present Perfect in ESL/EFL

This section examines whether the ESL/EFL learners from an L1 that has a similar temporal expression system to English perform equally with the English native speakers. It also reviews the aspect use in Chinese and compares the similarity and difference between the two languages in the sense of present perfect.

2.3.1 Learners from an L1 with Similar Aspect

A language with deictic time reference provides an established conceptual

structure and morphological temporal reference which its native speakers can turn to when faced with L2 conceptualizations of time and morphological tense. Hinkel's study (1992) proves such an extrapolation. In the study, native speakers of languages with deictic time reference, such as Spanish and Arabic, have less problems perceiving the English temporal system than the groups of tenseless native languages, like Chinese and Korean. However, a native language background alone does not promise an error-free use in the temporal reference of the target language. For the Arabic speakers in the study, although English notions of temporality seem to impose reduced constraints on their learning, their acquisition of the meanings and forms for the perfect tenses appears to present substantial difficulty.

Lock (1996) finds similar performance in Italian learners of English. Italian has forms analogous to the English present perfect (*passato prossimo*) and simple past (*passato remoto*). The functions of these forms are like their corresponding structure in English. However, Italian tends to extend the use of *passato prossimo* (present perfect) to any event located in the relatively recent past, where the simple past is preferred in English. Consequently, it would not be surprising when Italian learners of English produce errors like:

(34) * I have seen her last week.

Thus, even with a native language having similar temporal expressions, EFL/ESL

learners still go through a period of error and correction when learning English tenses and aspects.

2.3.2 Aspect in Chinese

In Chinese, the temporal expression is coded in adverbials other than tenses. However, Chinese has aspect uses (Lock, 1996), yet the idea of present perfect remains vague. The use of suffix *le* shares some characteristics with it. It has been widely debated that there are a verbal *le* and a sentential *le*; the former functions as a marker of past tense, indicating a completed action (Brandt, 1943; Pettus, 1943; Wang, 1947; He, 1954; Kratochvil, 1968; Chao, 1968; cited in Huang, 1988), while the latter gives a ‘change of state/status’ meaning (Chang, 1982, 1986). Both *les* carry meanings and functions similar but not identical to the English present perfect. The verbal *le* serves as a marker of ‘realis’, denoting an action that happened, has happened, and is happening, and also ‘anteriority’ that marks the sequencing of events (Chang, 1986). Primarily verbal *le* is a perfective aspect suffix, defines the ordering relation of the time of the event with respect to the reference time, and functions as a marker of perfective aspect and relative anteriority. It is the latter use that is similar to the English perfect (Rohsenow, 1978). The sentential *le* is regarded as a marker of ‘currently relevant state’ (Li and Thompson, 1981; Li, Thompson and Thompson, 1982, cited in Huang, 1988), ‘completed action as of the present’ function (Chao,

1968, cited in Huang, 1988), and ‘change of state’ (Change, 1982, 1986). For instance, Example (35) can yield the different readings of completed action, currently relevant state or change of state, and also progress:

- (35) 他 來 了
Tā lái le
he come LE
‘He came’ (completed action)
‘He has come’ (currently relevant state, change of state)
‘He is coming’ (progress)

This ‘currently relevant state’ meaning relates *le* to the English present perfect.

Another Chinese aspect marker *guo* also shares part of the meanings of the English present perfect. Most Chinese linguists agree that *guo* carries the ‘experiential’ meaning (Chao, 1968, Su, 1973, Henne et al., 1977, Li and Thompson, 1981, cited in Huang, 1988), signaling that an event has been experienced in the indefinite past. For example,

- (36) 我們 去 過 美國
Wǒmen qù-guo Měiguó
we go-GUO American
‘We have been to the U.S.’

In addition, Lin (1979, cited in Huang, 1988) points out that *guo* can sometimes be treated as a ‘recent past complete aspect marker’, but is subject to the discourse and situational contexts. His example helps to illustrate the idea:

- (37) 我 吃過 魚翅 了
Wǒ chī-guo yú-chì le
I eat-GUO fish-fin LE
‘I’ve eaten the shark’s fin already.’ (a recent completion)

‘I have the experience of eating shark’s fin.’ (experience of a lifetime)

The same remark can express a recent completion (I’ve eaten the shark’s fin; I don’t want another bowl), as well as an experience (I’ve eaten shark’s fin in my life). To reach an appropriate interpretation, discourse and situational contexts play important roles (Lin, 1979). These senses are related to the uses of the ‘experiential perfect’ and the ‘perfect of the recent past’ in English. Table 3 lists the features that English present perfect and Chinese suffixes *le* and *guo* share.

Feature	Present perfect	Chinese <i>LE</i>	Chinese <i>GUO</i>
Anteriority, Realis	V	V	V
Current relevant state	V	V	X
Indefinite past, Experiential	V	V	V
Recent past	V	X	V

Table 3. Features of English present perfect and Chinese suffixes *le* and *guo*

Similar in several features, Chinese suffixes *le* and *guo* also serve some functions that English present perfect has. In Chinese, *le* can be attached to an instantaneous verb, and yields the reading of ‘change of state’. For example:

- (38) 他 走 了
 Tā tsǒ le
 he go LE
 ‘He has gone’

The ‘change of state’ is partially related to the function of ‘resultative perfect’, for

they both look at the current result of an earlier action. However, when *le* indicates the meaning of ‘change of state’, it allows the co-occurrence of a period of time, since the state can last. In contrast, ‘resultative perfect’ in English rarely comes in with a period of time, unless the results of the actions are states. Therefore, Chinese *le* in this use cannot fully be mapped onto the ‘resultative perfect’.

Moreover, this ‘change of state’ can happen very recently, thus fulfills the function of “perfect of recent past”, as illustrated in (39):

- (39) 他們 到 了
 Tāmen dao le
 they arrive LE
 ‘They have just arrived’

Besides, *le* can also be attached to an iterative or a durative verb, and codes a reading of “continuative perfect”:

- (40) 李四 跳 三 個 鐘頭 的 繩 了
 Lǐsì tiào sān -ge zhōngtóu -de shéng le
 Lisi jump three-ge hour -DE rope LE
 ‘Lisi has jumped a rope for three hours (now)’

(cited in Huang, 1988)

Table 4 sums up the functions of the English present perfect which Chinese suffixes *le* and *guo* also serve:

Functions of English Present Perfect	Chinese <i>LE</i>	Chinese <i>GUO</i>
Continuative	V	X
Experiential	X	V
Resultative	V	X
Recent past	V	V

Table 4. Functions of English present perfect and Chinese suffixes *le* and *guo*

However, the types of verbs that suffix *le* can be attached to in order to fulfill the functions of “continuative” and “resultative” perfect are not mutually excluded. In English, the verb type for the continuative reading needs to be iterative or durative, while that for the resultative reading must be instantaneous. But in Chinese, an instantaneous action results in a state after change, and the state is possible to last for some time. Therefore, Example (41) is perfectly correct in Chinese:

(41) 他 過世 兩 年 了

Tā guòshì liǎn nián le

he die two year LE

* 'He has died for two years'

'He has been dead for two years'

When dealing with an English continuative perfect situation, Chinese learners are likely to transfer such use to it and thus produce absurd language.

In addition to the suffixes *le* and *guo*, the concept of time is mainly expressed through adverbials in Chinese. To convey the ideas of experience and results at the present time, Chinese equivalents to “ever”, “never”, “already”, and “yet” are added. The meaning of ‘recent past’ is expressed through the Chinese equivalent to “just”. These adverbials can partly aid the understanding of the present perfect.

As a consequence, the English perfect imposes on Chinese learners not only morphological complexity, requiring an auxiliary “have” and the past participle form of a verb, but also cognitive complexity, demanding the knowledge of the various meanings it carries. What is more, the particular verb types in the application of different functions bring forth extra acquisition load. Therefore, Chinese learners are mostly confused at its functions and appropriate use. Hinkel (1992) reports that the present perfect is the last temporal reference that Chinese learners of English perceive, after the sequence of present progressive, simple past, past perfect, past progressive, simple present, present perfect progressive, and past perfect progressive.

Research on Taiwanese EFL learners’ acquisition of the English tenses has also revealed the difficulty of the present perfect for students. Deng (1987) observes that high school students often misuse simple past for the perfect forms, and avoidance of perfect forms is often found in students’ spontaneous writing (Huang, 1988). Yu (1997) explores Taiwanese learners’ perception of the perfect and finds that most of

them seem to be aware of the meaning of the perfect forms, but they have difficulty in setting temporal relationships among ST, ET and RT.

To sum up, studies examined above all point to the fact that the English present perfect is complex in both meaning and function; thus it tops the difficulty hierarchy of tense/aspect for either L1 or L2 learners and results in late acquisition. In the mean time, there is a discrepancy in the acquisition rate of the different uses of present perfect, i.e. 'perfect of persistent situation', 'experiential perfect', 'perfect of result' and 'recent past'. Studies in Chinese language reveal that Chinese mainly makes use of temporal adverbials instead of morphological mechanism to code time frame, which may place extra cognitive load on Chinese learners of English when learning tense/aspect, particularly the present perfect. Previous studies on local students' acquisition verify that indeed Chinese learners are weak at using the perfect forms. In a word, due to its complicated nature, the English present perfect poses great difficulty in acquisition to both native speakers and EFL/ESL learners.