



The Use of English Present Perfect by Malaysian Chinese ESL Learners

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Introduction

The English present perfect is widely acknowledged to be one of the most challenging grammatical constructions for learners to attain in acquiring English as a second or foreign language (Wijaya & Hidarto, 2018). The present perfect contains two separate and autonomous grammatical categories of the verb, tense and aspect, each of which can operate independently of the other. The present perfect is treated as a combination of the two, making it a complex tense especially for ESL learners to use correctly. In addition, the acquisition of the present perfect is also developed at a later stage in L1 and L2 acquisition (Van Herk, 2008). Hence, the acquisition of the present perfect is indeed a cognitively complex process.

In Malaysia, the English syllabus for secondary school treats the present perfect tense as a more complex structure in its list of the grammatical items, therefore it is not taught until Form Two and upwards. The Form Two syllabus introduces the present perfect to the learners as an overview, treating the grammatical structure it produces as one that is completely new for the learners. The learners are taught the rules for constructing the structure, that is, what the structure should look like, what its function is and what it means. It is also introduced with an adverbial of duration; i.e., the prepositions 'for' and 'since'. In the Form Three syllabus, the learners are taught simple present perfect use with the time adverbials 'just', 'already' and 'yet'. After the learners have become familiar with the rules of the structure, they are taught to distinguish between the present perfect simple and the past simple and between the present perfect simple and the present perfect continuous. In upper secondary school, the use of the present perfect is reinforced through further exercises or activities. The activities are controlled that is, they are designed to provide practice in using the new structure and are focused on meaning, learners' fluency and use in real-life tasks or situations.

Stranks (2003) mentioned that it is important to teach learners how to use the grammatical form in spoken or written discourse when teaching the new form. This aids the learners in learning to think about what circumstances might require the use of the new form. He added that if the learners had difficulty in using the new form, teachers could raise the learners' awareness of form and function, and that could help



them to use it appropriately. The Malaysian English syllabus of the present perfect in general puts emphasis on teaching the grammatical item by the rules. Stranks (2003) argued that the learners should be introduced to the function of the form and the meaning underlying the sentences before using the present perfect to produce their own sentences. He believed this would help learners to gradually learn to produce new language forms appropriately. Stranks (2003) does have a point here, as this makes for more effective learning of the structure. In line with Stranks' (2003) viewpoint, it is therefore important that emphasis should be given to teaching of the functions of the present perfect. However, the researchers have observed that there has been no effort to teach the structure according to the four functions in the syllabus. Due to this gap, the researchers decided to investigate the use of the four present perfect functions that are found in Leech's (2004) *Meaning and the English Verb* among L1 Chinese learners.

In practice, the English present perfect is not introduced to Malaysian learners at an early stage, as early as in the primary school level. Nevertheless, in spite of this exposure to the tense in a later stage, a common problem in the Malaysian English language classroom is students' perplexity when confronted with the English present perfect. So perplexed are they that they continue to present errors in the use of the present perfect at the end of their 11 years of learning English in school. As may be expected, this state of affairs is apparent in other countries in the same region where English is taught as a second language such as China, Thailand and Vietnam (Hinkel, 1992, 1997; Svalberg & Chuchu, 1998). Malaysian ESL Learners who are L1 Chinese speakers are not an exception. Chang (2001) explored the interference effect of the Chinese language on the learning of English. Chang then indicated that even the most proficient L1 Chinese learners find it difficult to master the complexity of the English verb system. Previous research in the area of acquisition of English verb tenses by L2 learners (Kwan & Wong, 2016; Muneera & Rafik-Galea, 2013; Wong, 2012) has also confirmed that most second language learners have difficulty using the correct verb tenses in their English language production. Therefore, the researchers decided to compare the performance of learners who are at two different proficiency levels.

This research project was conducted at a time when many studies were being conducted to address issues pertaining to the steady deterioration of English language proficiency among university graduates in Malaysia. This problem has increasingly become a major concern in relation to graduate unemployment due to low levels of English competency. The ability to communicate and write English well is crucial for employment in the highly competitive private sector. An investigation into the current situation of ESL performance in using the English present perfect will play an important role in attempts to enhance the quality of learning and teaching English.

The acquisition of the English present perfect is considered one of the most difficult grammar categories to learn for second language learners. This study aimed to shed light on some of the intricacies of the acquisition of the English present perfect by L1 Chinese ESL learners in Malaysia. The findings of this study, therefore enhance the understanding of the English present perfect, particularly the four functions of the present perfect. In addition, the study was expected to identify the performance of L1 Chinese ESL learners of two different proficiency levels in using each present perfect function. This study was also anticipated to contribute to a better understanding of the meaning and functions of the English present perfect for better mastery of this grammatical construction. The research results can be used to improve the approaches to teaching and learning the English present perfect in non-native English-speaking countries like Malaysia.

In view of the aims and objectives of the study, a research question was formulated as follows:

Does L1 Chinese ESL learners' English language proficiency affect their use of the English present perfect functions?

Methodology

Participants

The written tasks were produced by 60 participants of two levels of proficiency (advanced and intermediate) who were selected based on three criteria. All the participants took the standardised Oxford Placement Test 2 (OPT2) (Allan, 2004) after which, they were grouped as advanced or intermediate.

Instruments

A cloze task, a Grammaticality Judgement Task (GJT) and a translation task were used to study the four present perfect functions.

Cloze Task

The cloze task featuring 20 blanks tested use of all four present perfect functions; the items were adapted from a short story. An example is given below:

THE LATE BUS

“The bus will be late,” the supervisor said.

I nodded and snapped, “The bus is very late! I (1) _____ (be) here since 8.30am. It is now 9.45am!”

Grammaticality Judgement Task (GJT)

The Grammaticality Judgement Task presented 34 items from seven short passages for participants to judge if the four present perfect functions were grammatical or ungrammatical. If ungrammatical, participants replaced them with grammatical entries. An example is given below:

(1) Over the last twenty years, the average size of households has fallen dramatically. _____ _____	Grammatical () Ungrammatical ()
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Translation Task

Translation tasks are also widely used in SLA research. Here, participants were asked to translate two short passages from Chinese to English. The passages were carefully adapted from various source texts and tested the four present perfect functions. An excerpt of the translation task is given below:

Read the passages below and translate them into English using the correct tense.

阅读以下短文并将其以正确的时态翻译成英文。

短文1

瑞本是我认识超过二十年的朋友。我们从孩提时代已经相识。最近，他与家人已搬迁到我住的同一条街道上的一所房子，如今我们的孩子几乎每天都会一起玩耍。

Methods of Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to analyse data quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data came from the cloze task, the Grammaticality Judgement Task and the translation task, while qualitative data was obtained from the cloze task and the translation task. The following formula was used to obtain the total percentage of correct use of each present perfect function.

$$\text{Total percentage of correct use of the PP function} = \frac{\text{Total no. of PP function used}}{\text{Total no. of obligatory context of PP function}} \times 100$$

Present perfect obligatory context	Appropriate use		
	Number of use	Total context	Accuracy (%)
State-up-to-the present			
Indefinite past			
Habit-leading-to-the present			
Resultative past			

A simple descriptive statistical procedure measured correct use of the four present perfect functions, while independent samples *t*-test and the Mann-Whitney test were used to test the hypotheses.

Findings and Discussion

In order to address the research question; that is, the significance of the effect of L1 Chinese ESL learners' English language proficiency on their use of the English present perfect functions, the following four null hypotheses were postulated.

State-up-to-the Present Function (SP)

The first null hypothesis was as follows:

H_{01} = There is no significant difference in the mean percentage of correct use of the state-up-to-the present function in the present perfect environments between the advanced- and intermediate-level L1 Chinese ESL learners.

Table 1 presents the results of testing this null hypothesis.

TABLE 1

Comparison between Advanced and Intermediate Participants' Performance on the Elicitation Tasks for the State-up-to-the Present Function

Proficiency level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	
						Lower	Upper
Advanced	7.93	2.33	1.28	58	.200	-.43	1.96
Intermediate	7.17	2.29					

According to the *t*-test results, the advanced learners produced a higher frequency of correct use of the state-up-to-the present function ($M_{adv} = 7.93$, $M_{int} = 7.17$, $t_{58} = 1.3$, $p > .05$, 95% *CI*[-0.43, 1.96]). As the *p*-value was greater than alpha at 0.05 level of significance, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. We concluded that there was insignificant difference in the mean percentage of correct use of the state-up-to-the-present function between the two groups of Chinese learners.

Indefinite Past Function (IP)

The second null hypothesis was as follows:

H_{02} = There is no significant difference in the mean percentage of correct use of the indefinite past function in the present perfect environments between the advanced- and intermediate-level L1 Chinese ESL learners.

Table 2 presents the results of testing this null hypothesis.

TABLE 2

Comparison between Advanced and Intermediate Participants' Performance on the Elicitation Tasks for the Indefinite Past Function

Proficiency level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	
						<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
Advanced	5.90	1.67	.87	58	.380	-.541	.41
Intermediate	5.47	2.10					

Based on the results, the advanced learners produced a higher frequency of correct use of the indefinite past function ($M_{adv} = 5.90$, $M_{int} = 5.47$, $t_{58} = 0.9$, $p > .05$, 95% $CI[-0.54, .41]$). However, this difference was statistically insignificant. Therefore, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Thus, we concluded there was insignificant difference in the mean percentage of correct use of the indefinite past function between the two groups of Chinese learners.

Habit-Leading-to-the Present Function (HP)

The third null hypothesis was as follows:

H_{03} = There is no significant difference in the mean percentage of correct use of the habit-leading-to-the present function in the present perfect environments between the advanced- and intermediate-level L1 Chinese ESL learners.

Table 3 presents the results of testing this null hypothesis.

TABLE 3

Comparison between Advanced and Intermediate Participants' Performance on the Elicitation Tasks for the Habit-leading-to-the Present Function

Proficiency level	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Mann-Whitney U</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Advanced	35.95	286.50	-2.48	.010
Intermediate	25.05			

According to the results, the advanced learners produced a higher frequency of correct use of the habit-leading-to-the present function ($MRank_{adv} = 35.95$, $MRank_{int} = 25.05$, $U = 286.5$, $p < .05$, $Z = -2.48$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This showed that there was a significant difference in the mean rank of correct use of the habit-leading-to-the present function between the two groups of Chinese learners. The effect size was medium, 0.32 (Cohen, 1988).

Resultative Past Function (RP)

The fourth null hypothesis was as follows:

H_{04} = There is no significant difference in the mean percentage of correct use of the resultative past function in the present perfect environments between the advanced- and intermediate-level L1 Chinese ESL learners.

Table 4 presents the results of testing this null hypothesis.

TABLE 4

Comparison between Advanced and Intermediate Participants' Performance on the Elicitation Tasks for the Resultative Past Function

Proficiency level	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U	Z	p
Advanced	31.37	424.0	-.42	.680
Intermediate	29.63			

As the results indicate, the advanced learners produced a higher frequency of correct use of the resultative past function ($MRank_{adv} = 31.37$, $MRank_{int} = 29.63$, $U = 424.0$, $p > .05$, $Z = -0.42$). Therefore, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. In other words, there was insignificant difference in the mean rank of correct use of the resultative past function between the two groups of Chinese learners.

According to the above tests, it was concluded that there was no difference between the intermediate and the advanced groups for the correct use of state-up-to-the-present function, indefinite past function and resultative past function. In contrast, there was a significant difference in the correct use of habit-leading-to-the-present function between the two groups of Chinese learners.

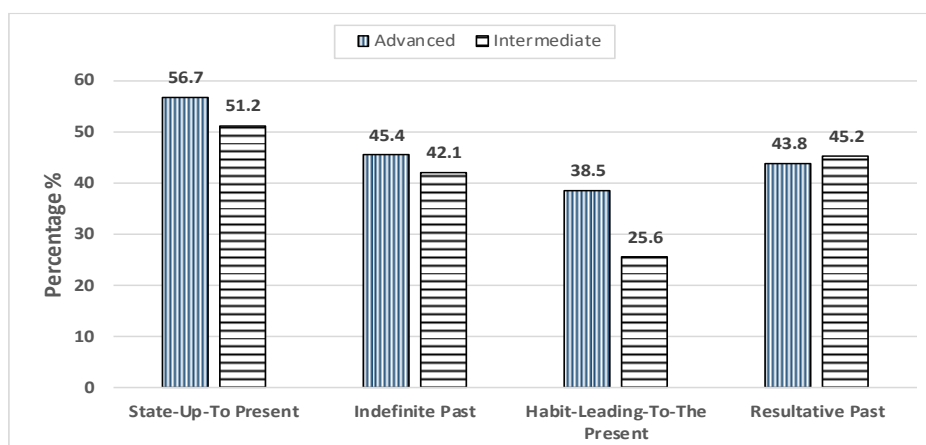


Figure 1. Mean percentage of distribution of correct answers to tasks testing the use of the four present perfect functions in present perfect environments in percentage for advanced and intermediate levels.

The data obtained from Figure 1 showed that the L1 Chinese learners exhibited some differences in the order of accuracy of the four present perfect functions in the two levels of proficiency.

The L1 Chinese advanced proficiency group registered the following accuracy order from highest to lowest:

Function 1 [SP] > Function 2 [IP] > Function 3 [RP] > Function 4 [HP].

The intermediate group reflected the following accuracy order from highest to lowest:

Function 1 [SP] > Function 2 [RP] > Function 3 [IP] > Function 4 [HP].

As shown in Figure 1, the results indicated that both advanced and intermediate groups among the L1 Chinese learners were most successful in using the state-up-to-the-present function. The habit-leading-to-the-

present function was found to be the most difficult for both the advanced and intermediate L1 Chinese groups. Also, the difference between the intermediate and the advanced groups for correct use of habit-leading-to-the present function was big 38.5% for the advanced group and only 25.6% for the intermediate group. The resultative past function seemed to be more difficult than the indefinite past function for the advanced group. On the contrary, the indefinite past function seemed to be more difficult than the resultative past function for the intermediate group. The L1 Chinese learners at both proficiency levels, advanced and intermediate, performed the poorest in the habit-leading-to-the present function of the present perfect.

The findings of the study have pedagogical implications. In the present study, the grammatical category under investigation was the English present perfect tense. There are a few possible factors that may have hindered the L1 Chinese learners from using the English present perfect appropriately in different situations: (1) Since there is no one-on-one equivalent of present perfect in Chinese, the learners did not know when to use it appropriately; (2) The present perfect is a more complex tense unlike, for instance, the simple present and simple past, which generally refer to either present or past events without referring to a separate time frame in Reichenbach's (1966) terms; and (3) The present perfect has multiple meanings and functions and is heavily dependent on the context.

In order to overcome these difficulties, the language instructors should consider in teaching the present perfect in English, namely the emphasis of different functions and temporal relations in the different uses of the present perfect (Baker, 2002). Several suggestions that highlight this language area are presented here to help language instructors and students' experience effective teaching and learning.

Language instructors should bear in mind the complexity of the English present perfect construction and simplify the teaching of this property in a classroom. The findings of the present study highlight to learners the importance of understanding the full meaning of the different functions and temporal relations between the different uses of the English present perfect, therefore language instructors should begin lessons on this complex tense by teaching this point first. The following are several suggestions as to how to manage the teaching of the present perfect tense in the advanced level:

- Based on the common errors made by the learners in the present study, it is recommended that language instructors make the teaching of tense and aspect simple and easy to understand. They should teach not only the form but also its function. Also, language instructors should teach their students the easiest function first. The progression of teaching items when teaching the English present perfect functions should be to begin with the state-up-to-the-present function, then move to the indefinite past or resultative past function (in no particular order) and finally end with the habit-leading-to-the-present function.

- More attention should be devoted to teaching the habit-leading-to-the-present (HP) function that poses more difficulty for students, since students tend not to consistently use this function correctly until much later in their learning. The HP function has the combination aspects of event and state uses, which are similar to the 'state' use of the present perfect (SP function) that is complex in meaning assigned to this function. To simplify the teaching of this function to advanced learners, Leech and Svartvik (2002) have suggested that focus should be given to knowing the different meanings attached to a verb (event or state verb). Once the understanding of the event and state verbs is reached, the students should be able to distinguish between the SP and HP functions and use them successfully without any confusion.

- Language instructors should give extensive examples of the four functions of the present perfect and show how the different functions can produce different meanings when they appear in a particular context. The lesson could be enriched by taking into account the role that the English present perfect functions play. Selected materials may be presented in the form of fill-in-the-blanks in cloze passages for students to practise.

- Language instructors should encourage their students to list down the four functions and their examples in their notebooks or to draw a table for easy reference whenever they are not confident about using the functions. In addition, students could learn the functions through repetition and drill practice as a strategy to promote retention (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

- Language instructors should help students to understand the usage of the present perfect by showing how it is used in real-life situations in an explicit way. For instance, the teacher may organise the students

into pairs to create a dialogue for a scenario they can act out that describes past events with current relevance. Other learner activities could include talks about past experiences or learners could be invited to describe habits and discuss states that began in the past and continue in the present or even describe recent past events.

- Language instructors may divide the class into small groups of four to five students each. The students may then be given a story containing the four functions of the present perfect. They should first be allowed to read and identify the sentences that contain the present perfect functions in their groups. Then, they could be invited to give explanations as to why the present perfect functions appear in certain contexts. Finally, they may present their reasoning to the class.

- Language instructors may get the students to write stories that prompt them to use the present perfect functions. These types of exercise are implicit acquisition and could increase the chance for learners to notice the use of the present perfect.

Conclusions

This research concludes that the advanced and intermediate L1 Chinese were most successful in using the state-up-to-the present function and the least successful in using the habit-leading-to-the present function. Based on the findings, some pedagogical implications have been suggested to improve teaching and learning of the English present perfect functions. Furthermore, this research also presents some limitations. The instruments used in this study focused on the ability to use the present perfect in written elicitation tasks. It is therefore recommended that spoken data be obtained in future studies as it is possible that some learners might be more effective in their use of the present perfect when interacting spontaneously in oral interaction.

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