

Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Motivation

The English temporal system includes past, present, and future tenses, along with habitual, progressive, and perfect aspects. To describe an event, the English speaker needs to consider the relation between the time of occurrence (event time, termed as ET) and the time of speech (ST). What is more, the speaker needs a reference time (RT) to anchor his/her viewpoint of the event. Thus, he/she has to make judgments of ET, ST, and RT when deciding on the tenses and aspects in order to locate an event in the time stream. Among the temporal concepts in English, the present perfect, according to Givon (1993), is functionally the most complex aspect. It requires not only the knowledge of distinguishing ET, ST, and RT as separate points in time, but also the various meanings the form carries. The acquisition of the present perfect thus comes late in child language (Weist, 1986).

To an ESL/EFL learner whose first language lacks a delicate temporal system, such as Chinese, the learning task of the English tense/aspect can be overwhelming. He/she may have to start with the basic concepts of event time, speech time, and reference time. To their comfort, some research studies hold that time reference of a new language may not always pose a serious problem to second language learners. Von Stutterheim and Klein (1987) state that a second language learner does not have

to acquire the underlying concepts; what he/she has to acquire is a specific way and a specific means of expressing them (cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). However, the opposite opinion also gains some supports. Guiora (1983) claims that with a native language that has a parsimonious temporal expression system, second language learners may need to establish an entirely new hypothesis of how time is used and referred to in the target language (cited in Hinkel, 1992), like the children who learn a language as the first one. The difficulty can be explicated by Slobin's operating principles (1973, 1985a) concerning learners' acquisition stages of the temporal system. When the linguistic mechanisms expressing a time concept are identical across languages, the emergence stage of the time concept in the evolving temporal system is stable across the languages. Contrarily, when the linguistic mechanisms vary, there will be variability in the emergence time of temporal concepts across languages (cited in Weist, 1986).

In contrast to English, which marks the ordering relation of the event time with regard to the speech time, Chinese lacks a clear time-marking system. It only defines the time reference when trying to avoid confusion (Bull, 1960, cited in Rohsenow, 1978). As Chinese is one of the languages which have aspect only but no tense, Chinese learners of English tend to have many problems with the English tense system (Lock, 1996). Moreover, the mechanism coding time reference in

Chinese is distinct from that of English, mainly adverbials. Therefore, Chinese learners of English need to acquire not only a complex linguistic form of marking tenses and aspects, but also the judgment of time reference. Although Chinese learners have usually developed complete temporal concepts about the real world when they start to learn English, they still have trouble grasping the essence of English tenses and aspects.

To the Chinese EFL learners, the various English tenses and aspects pose different degrees of difficulty in acquisition. Among the English temporal system, the present perfect ranks high in the difficulty hierarchy (Huang, 1994). As mentioned earlier, present perfect requires the knowledge of locating independent ET, ST, and RT, and also a thorough understanding of its various meanings. Such complexity makes the present perfect one of the most troublesome tenses in the English verb system for non-native learners (Walker, 1967). Chinese learners of English thus tend to avoid using this form (Huang, 1988; Yu, 1997).

The present study thus aims to find out the acquisition of the English present perfect by Chinese students at the senior high school stage, during which they are exposed to more input of the present perfect after a brief introduction of the pattern at junior high school. It takes a closer look at the various features of the present perfect, and examines which one has caused the greatest confusion among Chinese learners.

1.2 Significance of the Present Study

Previous studies on Chinese students' learning of English tenses and aspects primarily looked at students' spontaneous use of the English temporal system (Deng, 1987; Huang, 1988; Huang, 1994; Yu, 1997). The results simply revealed a tendency of students' misuse of other tenses for the present perfect (Deng, 1987), and an observation that they usually avoid using it (Huang, 1988; Yu, 1997). No research has been conducted to further explore where students' difficulty lies in using the present perfect.

This study aims to examine the meanings and functions of English present perfect in detail, and find out what poses the greatest difficulty for the Taiwanese high school students. Based on the results, implications to enhance the teaching and learning of the present perfect will further be provided. It is hoped that the findings here will help to reflect some problems with the instruction of this tense/aspect feature and arouse teachers' awareness of what to reinforce in the future instruction.