The meaning of the English simple past tense in foreign language acquisition: influence of the mother tongue

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From the very first studies on the acquisition of tenses such as that of Reyes's (1969) to the most recent (Bhardwaj et alii 1988 (eds.)), the influence of the mother tongue in the acquisition of L2 tense meanings has always been acknowledged.

Reyes (1969) found that Tagalog speakers reinterpret L2 English tense and aspect systems according to the systems in their own language. These learners tend to confuse three groups of English tenses: the present perfect and the past perfect, the future and the conditional, and the present continuous and the past continuous. This is so because these pairs are not differentiated in Tagalog.

Edström (1973) states that Swedish learners of English often use a perfect construction to refer to past time in English because Swedish does not take into account whether the past connects to the present moment or not. Since this connection between the past and the present can be expressed in Swedish either with a perfect or with a simple present, another usual error is the use of the present instead of a perfect.

Such problems are explained by Trévise (1986). The researcher points out that second language learners already have an idea of time in their L1 and, consequently, they have to acquire a new set of relationships between forms and functions when learning L2. The same idea appears in Bhardwaj et alii (eds.) (1988: 84):

> «Our learners acquire a structured repertoire underlying which is a system that generates their utterances within particular contexts. The temporal dimension of the reality they wish to refer to is symbolized to a great extent by the systems they have at their disposal at the time of speaking.»

As the studies which have been briefly reviewed above, this paper also deals with the influence of the mother tongue in the acquisition and use of tense meanings. The focus is on Spanish and Catalan as L1 and English as a foreign language. It is hypothesized that the different relationship between form and meaning in Spanish and Catalan, on the one hand, and English, on the other, may lead learners to apply the patterning in L1 tenses to L2 tenses and thus use the English present perfect in those contexts where a simple past should be used. As can be seen in the table below, the «pretérito perfecto» and the «pretérito indefinido», which are the equivalent forms to the English present perfect, are used in Spanish and Catalan, respectively, to refer to actions which took place in the near past[1, 2]. In English, on the contrary, the simple past tense must be used in such cases[3].

TABLE I

The expression of past time reference by means of tenses in English, Spanish and Catalan.

Time reference	*English*	*Spanish*	*Catalán*
Remote past	Simple past	Pretérito indefinido	Pretérito perfecto
Near past	Simple past	Pretérito perfecto	Pretérito indefinido
Recent past	Present perfect	Pretérito perfecto	Pretérito indefinido

In order to check this hypothesis, a cross-sectional empirical study was carried out with B.U.P. (1st, 2nd and 3rd) and C.O.U. students who were learning English as a foreign language in Barcelona. The sample consists of 80 subjects, 20 from each level (each level will be referred to as 1, 2, 3 and 4). The data include both their written and oral production. Both a qualitative and a quantitative study have been carried out to analyse the data.

The quantitative analysis studies two aspects. First, the percentages of use of the simple past and the present perfect, which have been obtained by means of the SPSS/PC+ programme (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*, M. Norusis. 1988. *SPSS/PC+ V2.0*. SPSS Inc: Illinois). The data have been analysed from two perspectives: according to the total number of subjects (80) and according to the levels (1, 2, 3, and 4). This twofold perspective permits the analysis of the acquisition and use of the simple past in B.U.P. and C.O.U. as a total population and also the study of the differences and similarities in the percentage of mother tongue influence across levels. The other aspect which is analysed quantitatively is the variables that favour the occurrence of L1 influence, that is, the possible reasons for the appearance of L1 influence in certain contexts but not in others. These variables have been studied by means of the VARBRUL 2 programme (*Variable Rule Analysis*, adapted for personal computer use by S. Pintzuk and D. Hindle, 1984)[4].

The meetings with the subjects in the study took place once a month in their schools during a whole school year (nine months). The subjects completed a written test which included four different kinds of exercises. In the first part the subjects had to fill in the blanks of sentences that explained several pictures with a suitable verb. In the second part the subjects had to use the correct tense from an infinitive form that was given to them. The third part was a translation of three sentences into English. Finally, the fourth part consisted of two short compositions, one about their activities the previous day and the other about their activities during the morning (the meetings took place in the afternoon or in the evening).

The oral data were elicited by means of an individual conversation with the researcher which was recorded and later transcribed. Both guided and free conversation

took place in the sense that sometimes the subjects answered questions that the researcher made and, in most cases, they talked freely, usually with a topic proposed either by the researcher or by the subject as the starting point.

The subjects' L1 was checked in case it did not conform to standard usage in Barcelona. Results show that only 4 of the 80 subjects use a Spanish «pretérito indefinido» instead of a «pretérito perfecto» to refer to the near past. However, only one of them uses the simple past to refer to such activities in English; the other three subjects' interlanguage does not seem to be influenced by L1, since the simple present and not the past is used to refer to the morning activities.

In what follows, the qualitative analysis of the data is presented first. The two kinds of data (written and oral) shall be commented separately because of the differences between them.

Results

The qualitative analysis

The written data

The data from the written tests show that many of the 80 subjects in the cross-sectional study apply L1 time reference to L2 English, that is, the present perfect is used instead of the simple past to refer to the near past. In those cases where L1 has an influence on English L2, one can trace a relationship between this influence and the subjects' level. In other words, the influence of the mother tongue is higher or lower depending on the subjects' level of studies.

It is at levels 2 and 4 that the subjects transfer the time reference in their L1 most, since they use a present perfect in those contexts where English requires a simple past, e.g. to refer to the morning activities once that period of time has finished. This is specially noticeable at level 4, since the C.O.U. subjects use a present perfect instead of a simple past much more frequently than the subjects at levels 2 and 3. Similarly, the subjects at levels 2 and 3 transfer the time reference in their L1 more often than the subjects at level 1.

These results seem to be directly related to instruction in the foreign language. An analysis of the subjects' textbooks shows that the present perfect is introduced at the end of the first year of B.U.P. (level 1) and reinforced during the second year (level 2). In the third year (level 3), other tenses are explained and practised and, finally, in C.O.U. (level 4) all English tenses are used by the students. Consequently, the subjects rely on their L1 once the present perfect has been studied in English, but not before. This is why mother tongue influence in the acquisition and use of the simple past is scarce at level 1 and increases at level 2.

According to the data, one can conclude that when a subject uses the present perfect in the correct contexts, he/she also uses it instead of a simple past:

S1, L1[5]:   He *has played* since 9.00.

I *have writen*[6] it three hours ago.

but

It is 11.00 p.m. now. I *have got up* at seven this morning.
I have got up at 7'00. I have caught the bus at 7'30 and I have come to school.

S21, L2: He *have played* football since 9.00.

but

It is 11.00 p.m. now. I'*ve got up* at seven this morning.

Nevertheless, there are some exceptions to this usage. We also come across subjects who always use the perfect in the adequate contexts, and subjects who do not use the present perfect instead of the simple past in a given task but use it in another task. For instance, in the production of S35,L4 the present perfect replaces the simple past in the composition but appears correctly used in the task where the learners have to use the correct tense from an infinitive form. On the contrary, S27, L3 uses the present perfect with the adequate time reference in the composition but not in the 'fill-in-the-blanks' task or in the 'use-the-correct-tense' task.

This variation in use may imply two things. Either that the different time references which the English present perfect and the simple past cover are not correctly understood by B.U.P. and C.O.U. students of EFL or that, even if there is a moment when they are correctly understood, L1 plays an important role in distorting the correspondences which had been previously established in the learners' IL.

The oral data

In general lines, similar features as in the written production are found in the oral data. However, the number of errors increases, probably because of lack of time to think about the language or because of the need to get the message across in the conversation.

An interesting feature that comes to light is the use of the simple present instead of the simple past to refer to the near past, e. g.:

R[7]: What about your activities this morning, please?

S69,L2: *I come to to school.*

R: uh huh.

S: *and I ... I do eh latín, mates, catalan (...) I have breakfast at eleven.*

Surprisingly, even if the present tense is not used in Spanish or Catalan for the near past, L1 influence seems to be clear in these cases. The use of the simple present by those subjects who have not learnt the present perfect yet shows the need to differentiate between the near past and the distant past, a difference which exists in their L1, but not in L2.

Nevertheless, not all the subjects present this use. As in the written data, some of the subjects who have already acquired the present perfect in English use it in the correct contexts and do not transfer the time reference from their L1, as in:

S12, L1: *This morning ... I got up about twelve o'clock.*

R: Good!

S: *and I come here, I got up, I had breakfast.*

                (...)

R: What have I done?

S: *You have eaten a sandwich.*

S60, L3:   *eh at half past eight I ... I did an exam and then bueno nada.*

R: Nothing? You stayed here in the instituto, you went home ... what did you do?

S: *No, I stayed here.*

All in all, the present perfect seems to be specially problematic for some of the subjects. The fact that some of them asked the researcher about the tense they should use to refer to a given action corroborates this idea:

S31, L4: R: What have I done?

S: *You drink the Coca-Cola.*

R: uh huh.

S: *or drank ... no sé si és passat o no és passat*[8].

S59, L3: R: What have I done?

S: *Comes.*

R: What have I done?

S: *Estás comiendo.*

R: No, I have finished.

S: *Ya has comido, ¿ya has acabado?*

R: What have I done?

S: *¿Qué tiempo sería?, bueno, ¿cómo sería, no?*

The hypothesis that foreign language learners tend to use the present perfect instead of the simple past is confirmed, e.g.:

S1, L1: S: *I ... I got I have got up at seven o'clock ... I ... have ... I have caught the bus at seven thirty ... and ... and I have come to the school.*

S22, L2: S: *Eh this morning ... I ... I have got early (...) then I ... I have gone no I have ... he anat a*[9]*... to the metro station.*

S75, L3: S: *I have ... got out at ... six o'clock.*

R: Six o'clock? Why at six o'clock?

S: *eh because I am studying.*

R: I see.

S: *I have been studying eh literatura ... then I I have come ... come back to the school ... I have come to the school.*

S33, L4: S: *This morning? I ... I I have I have ... I have get up early ... and after I ... I have been ay I I've come the school.*

The quantitative analysis

The written data

The percentages of use of the present perfect instead of the simple past have been obtained in the quantitative analysis. The 80 subjects in the cross-sectional study present a 22.7% of use of the present perfect instead of the simple past. However, the analysis also reveals that many of the items appear with a tense which is used neither in English nor in Spanish or Catalan.

The analysis of the data according to the levels shows that L1 influence increases at higher levels. As has already been explained in the qualitative analysis, this means that the subjects use the English present perfect instead of the simple past only when they have acquired the present perfect. Therefore, correct performance in the use of the simple past at lower levels may become incorrect when the level is higher.

The oral data

The percentage of L1 influence in the use of the English simple past by the 80 subjects is not too high (the average is 16.5%). The reason for this low percentage is that in the oral production the subjects often use a wrong tense instead of the simple past (the average percentage obtained for such cases is 43.7%). This wrong tense is usually the simple present which, as has already been mentioned in the qualitative analysis, can be seen as the result of mother tongue influence as well.

If one focuses on the subjects' reference to the near past according to the level of studies, L1 influence appears, as in the written production, at higher levels. At level 1 the percentage is lower than at levels 2 and 3 (15.6%, 17.9%, and 20.4%, respectively). However, contrary to the written data, the percentage at level 4 is 12.1%, the lowest of them all. This result may imply that unplanned tasks such as an informal conversation as opposed to grammatically-oriented tasks, which appear in the written test, facilitate the correct use of the simple past. Nevertheless, further research would be needed to give more accurate conclusions on the relationship between influence of the mother tongue and type of task.

The quantitative analysis has also studied the variables that favour the use of the present perfect instead of the simple past. This has been shown by means of probabilities[10]. Several linguistic, sociolinguistic and educational variables have been taken into account in the VARBRUL analysis. Final results show that out of the initial 19 groups of variables, 9 are statistically significant, that is, they favour or not the application of the rule, which is L1 influence in our case. These significant groups of variables are the following ones:

a) School (4 schools). Schools C and S present a very similar probability (.63 and .61), which is higher than the probability in school V (.50). School M shows the lowest probability (.28). Therefore, transfer is favoured by schools C and S, it is disfavoured by school M and, finally, school V is neutral with respect to the application of the rule.

b) Level of studies (1-4). As expected, the probability of the occurrence of L1 influence at level 1 is the lowest because the present perfect is not usually introduced

until the end of level 1 or at level 2. This is why results show that the probability increases progressively in higher levels (.34 at level 1 and .63 at level 4).

c) Socioeconomic and cultural level (high, middle and low). Final results show that a low socioeconomic and cultural level disfavours the appearance of transfer whereas higher levels seem to favour it.

d) Years of English studies (0-9). The lowest probability appears after 6 years of English and the highest with 4 or 5 years. Those subjects with 3 years of English present a higher probability than those with 6 or more years but a lower probability than those with 4 or 5. This means that L1 influence is favoured most by 3, 4 and 5 years of English.

e) Activities related to English after school hours (no activities, few activities and some activities). If no or few activities related to English are carried out after school hours, L1 influence is favoured (.55); it is not favoured in those cases when such activities are carried out (.45).

f) Sex (girls and boys). Boys present a higher probability than girls. However, this result is tentative, since it may be affected by the distribution of the subjects.

g) Type of sentence (affirmative, interrogative and negative). Negative sentences favour the appearance of L1 influence more than affirmative and interrogative sentences (.85, 31 and .28, respectively).

h) Type of oral task (narration and answer to questions). Narration presents a higher probability than answer to questions (.78 / .22), since it is in narratives where the subjects use the simple past or the present perfect most.

i) Type of written task (fill in the blanks, use the correct tense, translation and composition). The composition task favours L1 influence more than the other tasks, since the probability obtained for this task has been .65 whereas the other tasks present .44, .50 and .40.

Conclusion

After the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the results, we can conclude that the hypothesis stated at the beginning of the paper has been confirmed. Spanish and Catalan learners of English as a foreign language rely on their L1 in the acquisition and use of the English simple past tense and this is why they sometimes use a present perfect instead of a simple past. As has been seen, L1 influence is more frequent in the second year of B.U.P. and in C.O.U. than at other levels because of a close relationship with the presentation of tenses in the English class.

Certain variables seem to be more influential than others in the use of the present perfect instead of the simple past. We have seen that a relatively high level of English, the fact of carrying out few activities related to English after school hours and narration, among others, favour the appearance of L1 influence in the acquisition and use of the simple past. These findings imply that variables other than the languages themselves should be taken into account when studying mother tongue influence in foreign language acquisition.

These results may be useful to teachers of English as a foreign language who often come across the problem of the expression of time reference in their classes. Further research that focused on other tenses and other levels could give interesting material which could be compared with the results in this paper and in other studies.

Notes

1. The time span of the past which will be analysed here is the «near past», e.g. reference to the morning events, when the present moment is the afternoon.

2. Cf. Badia Margarit (1962) and Lázaro Carreter (1978), among others.

3. Cf. Long (1961), Leech (1971) and Coe (1980), among others.

4. I am most grateful to Dr M. T. Turell and Dr M. Freixa for their invaluable help with the VARBRUL and the SPSS, respectively.

5. The subjects' names have been substituted by numbers (S = subject, no.1-80). L stands for level (1-4).

6. The mistakes in the subjects' production have not been corrected.

7. R stands for researcher.

8. The translation of this Catalan sentence is «I don't know whether it is past or not.»

9. The translation of this Catalan utterance is «I have gone to».

10. In the VARBRUL analysis a probability of .50 means that the variable is neutral with respect to the application of the rule (L1 influence in our case). Higher and lower probabilities indicate whether the application of the rule is favoured or not, respectively.

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