Japanese EFL Learners’ Perception of the Distinctions between the Present Perfect and the Simple Past

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyze Japanese EFL learners’ perception of the present perfect in comparison with the simple past. Eighty-one new students of a senior high school were given 20 test items and required to choose the most appropriate verb form from the four choices. The result showed that there were statistically significant differences among many of the types about the comprehension of the present perfect. Regarding the relevance/irrelevance to the present situation, the questions about the persistence of the subject and the persistence of the result showed a rather poor understanding. Also concerning the indefinite/definite past meanings, the students had a tendency to connect frequency adverbials and duration adverbials with the present perfect. The result suggests that the confusion between the present perfect and the simple past is closely related to (1) the intervention of Japanese, (2) the attention on the surface meaning rather than on form, and (3) the oversight of “current relevance” (Twaddell, 1960), the core meaning of the present perfect.

1. Introduction

A Japanese learner of English who first learns the simple present and then the simple past hardly ever gets confused about the difference of form and meaning between them. It is not uncommon, however, for the same learner to fail to understand the proper use of the simple past and the present perfect.

Although both the simple past and the present perfect are used to describe a situation in the past, the difference between them “is in English observed more strictly than in the other languages possessing corresponding tenses” (Jespersen, 1933). That is, the simple past describes a definite past event or state without mentioning anything about the present. The present perfect, on the other hand, describes a past situation which continues up to the present
or brings some result to the present. This kind of "boundary problem" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999) causes a stumbling block for the Japanese learner who has no parallel tense and aspect system in his native language.

In this study, the results of a grammar comprehension test administered to the first year students at a senior high school will be reported. The students' understanding and confusion of the present perfect and the simple past will then be discussed and their present state of acquisition will be revealed. At the conclusion of this paper, some pedagogical implications will be suggested about the teaching of the present perfect in comparison with the simple past.

2. Research

The distinctions between the present perfect and the simple past lie first in the relevance/irrelevance to the present situation (i.e., the persistence of the subject, the topic, and the result) and second in the indefinite/definite past meanings (i.e., the use of temporal adverbials and the structure of discourse) (cf. Kashino, 1999). In order to investigate whether or not freshmen at senior high school understand the differences between the present perfect and the simple past, a grammar comprehension test was administered.

2.1. Method of the research

2.1.1. Subjects

The subjects were 81 first-year students at a senior high school in Osaka, between 15 and 16 years of age. No returnees were included. Nor was frequent contact with native English speakers reported by the subjects. They all had three years of English education at junior high school in Japan before admission to senior high school.

2.1.2. Procedure

Over a twenty-minute period, the subjects were given 20 short passages which contained 20 randomly arranged test items: 8 present perfect, 8 simple past, with one item each of simple present, present progressive, past progressive and future (see Appendix). The subjects were required to choose the most appropriate verb form from the four choices given. As the purpose of this research was to survey the students' understanding of the distinctions between the present perfect and the simple past, two choices in all the questions were the present perfect and the simple past.

2.2. Results and analysis

2.2.1. General overview

The mean score was 13.8 (max.=20, SD=2.33). The subjects showed 59.7% understanding of the eight present perfect questions and 69.8% of the eight simple past questions. In contrast, they reached a 98.8% understanding for the simple present, 90.1% for the future and 87.7% for the past progressive. The present progressive fell to 66.7%. The overall distribution of correct and erroneous answers is indicated in Table 1.
Table 1. The Overall Results of Correct and Erroneous Answers

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<td>57</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>59</td>
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<td>55</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. * = correct answer  N=81

2.2.2. Comprehension of the present perfect

2.2.2.1. Comprehension of each type

A large number of grammarians have discussed the present perfect and classified its types (Comrie, 1976; Quirk et al., 1985; Thomson & Martinet, 1986; Leech, 1987; Declerck, 1991; Leech & Svartvik, 1994; Swan, 1995; Ando, 1996; Kashino, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In this paper, the following four types by Comrie (1976) will be adopted, which appropriately reflects the traditional school grammar in Japan: the perfect of recent/indefinite past, the experiential perfect, the perfect of persistent situation, and the perfect of result.

The results of the eight present perfect questions are indicated in order of type in Figure 1. It shows that the acquisition of the present perfect is not a unitary and simultaneous occurrence in all types. Rather we find clear evidence that the difference of types influences the sequence
of acquisition.

![Figure 1. The Results of Correct and Erroneous Answers of the Present Perfect](image)

The experiential perfect (EXP) and the perfect of persistent situation (SIT) exhibit high levels of correct understanding between approximately 70% and 80%. The perfect of result (RES), however, drops sharply to 24.7%. Statistically interesting is the perfect of recent/indefinite past (PER). The percentage of correct answers between Nos. 17, 2 and 13 narrows by 12.3%, but the gap between these three and No.20 (the persistence of the subject) is remarkable. This means that the subcategories within the type have an influence on comprehension of the present perfect.

### 2.2.2.2. Comprehension within and across types

A McNemar's test was performed to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the comprehension of the present perfect within and across its types (df=1, p<.05). The main findings from the results shown in Table 2 are as follows:

In the first place, concerning the four questions of the perfect of recent/indefinite past, there were no significant differences between Nos. 17 and 2, between Nos. 17 and 13, and between Nos. 2 and 13. However, as is expected from the results in Figure 1, highly significant differences were found between No.20 and Nos. 17, 2 and 13. In fact, significant differences existed between No.20 and all the other questions except No.15 (the perfect of
result). When we look at each question, there were significant differences between No.17 and Nos. 20 and 15, between No.2 and Nos. 20, 5, 10 and 15, and between No.13 and Nos. 20, 5, 10 and 15.

**Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Comprehension among Types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>17</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17. PER</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>*26.27</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>*31.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. PER</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>*14.53</td>
<td>*5.16</td>
<td>*5.83</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>*22.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. PER</td>
<td>*13.71</td>
<td>*6.43</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>17.89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. PER</td>
<td>*35.37</td>
<td>31.39</td>
<td>*22.26</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. EXP</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>*38.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. SIT</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>*34.89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. SIT</td>
<td>*27.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. RES</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P<.05

Secondly, concerning the two questions of the perfect of persistent situation, there was no significant difference between them but there existed significant differences between No.10 and Nos. 2, 13, 20 and 15 and also between No.9 and Nos. 20 and 15.

Thirdly, when we look at the question of the experiential perfect, significant differences were found between No.5 and Nos. 2, 13, 20 and 15.

Fourthly and finally, concerning the perfect of result, as is clear from the analysis above, we could find significant differences between No.15 and all the other questions except No.20.

**2.2.3. Confusion between the present perfect and the simple past**

**2.2.3.1. Overuse of the present perfect**

Although No.3 (Mr. Yamada went to Australia several times when he was young) expresses definite completed events in the past, 53% of the students chose the present perfect (Figure 2). They may have regarded the sentence containing a frequency expression as the experiential type of the present perfect.

This assumption was supported by a questionnaire on Japanese verb forms (Table 3). The same students (N=81) were required to choose from either “itta (went)” or “itta koto ga aru (has been)” as an appropriate verb form which comes after “Watashi no chichi wa ninen mae ni amerika e (My father ______ to America two years ago)”. Seventy-two students chose “itta” and 9 students chose “itta koto ga aru”. However, when “ichido (once)” was added and the sentence became “Watashi no chichi wa ninen mae ni ichido amerika e (My father ______ to America once two years ago)”, only 7 students chose “itta” and as many as 74 students chose
"itta koto ga aru", which showed statistical significance ($\chi^2=61.23$, df=1, $p<.05$).

![Figure 2. No.3](attachment:image2.png)

![Figure 3. No.12](attachment:image3.png)

Table 3. The Results of a Questionnaire on Japanese Verb Forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1(a) Watashi no chichi wa ninen mae ni amerika e</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Watashi no chichi wa ninen mae ni ichido amerika e</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2(a) Watashi no chichi wa nijunen mae ni amerika e</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Watashi no chichi wa nijunen mae ni ichido amerika e</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. A: itta, B: itta koto ga aru.

Similarly, 45 students chose “itta” and 36 students chose “itta koto ga aru” after “Watashi no chichi wa nijunen mae ni amerika e (My father ______ to America twenty years ago)”. However, when the sentence became “Watashi no chichi wa nijunen mae ni ichido amerika e (My father ______ to America once twenty years ago)”, 25 students chose “itta” and 56 students chose “itta koto ga aru”, which was also statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.25$).

From this evidence, we can conclude that the students translated No.3 into Japanese and judged it from its meaning as the experiential type. In other words, they focused their attention solely on the classification of types without paying enough attention to “current relevance” (Twaddell, 1960), the core meaning of the present perfect.

In No.12 (Kazuo lived in London from 1990 to 1998), which contains an adverbial of a definite past duration, 44% students chose the present perfect (Figure 3). This means that the students are liable to connect not only a frequency expression but also a duration expression.
with the present perfect.

2.2.3.2. Underuse of the present perfect

For No.20 (Akagawa Jiro has written a lot of interesting stories), which is about the persistence of the subject, 36% students chose the simple past, 33% chose the simple present, and 31% chose the present perfect (Figure 4). This means that the number of students who chose either the simple past or the simple present surpassed the number of students who correctly chose the present perfect. One of the reasons for the students to choose the simple past is that they translated the English sentence into Japanese, “takusan no omoshiroi shosetsu o kaita”, and connected the “ta-form” in “kaita” with the simple past. Also their attention may have been directed to the past because the verb form of the preceding sentence is the simple past. Those who chose the simple present are construed to have recognized Akagawa Jiro as a person of the present, compared with Natsume Soseki as a person of the past, and to have connected him with the simple present.

From the perspective of the underuse of the present perfect, the simple past was most favored in No.15 (Yoko has broken her leg), where 44% chose it incorrectly (Figure 5). Here, as in No.20, they connected its meaning with the simple past, based on the “ta-form” of the Japanese translation, “ashi no hone o otta”. Those who chose the simple present may have made the tense of the sentence correspond with that of the second sentence.

![Figure 4. No.20](image1.png)  ![Figure 5. No.15](image2.png)

2.3. Discussion

Concerning the confusion between the present perfect and the simple past, we have analyzed the students' comprehension from the viewpoint of both overuse and underuse of the present perfect. We have identified, here, areas of difficulty in the acquisition of the English tense and aspect system as follows:

1. In understanding the tense and aspect system of English, the students first think in Japanese and then proceed to English by means of the Japanese translation.
2. They focus their attention on surface meaning rather than on form when they distinguish the
present perfect from the simple past.
(3) They approach the present perfect from the classification of types, not from its core meaning of “current relevance”.

From the students’ tendencies described above, the teacher should keep their L1 (i.e., Japanese) in mind and have them understand that what determines the proper use of the present perfect is not the classification of types but the relevance/irrelevance of a past event to the present situation.

3. Conclusion

Based on the findings from the research, the gist of teaching the present perfect in comparison with the simple past is to enable the learner to understand the following:
(1) The simple past describes an event or a situation which took place at a particular time in the past and no longer exists at the present moment. The present perfect, on the other hand, places its viewpoint on the present time and connects a past occurrence with the present.
(2) The meaning of the present perfect is determined by the context, the adverbials, or the lexical aspect of the verb. So the classification of the types is not essential to understanding the present perfect.
(3) The Japanese translation of a present perfect sentence is often the same as that of its equivalent simple past sentence. There is rarely a one-to-one correspondence between English and Japanese, and so several Japanese translations are possible.
(4) Whether or not to use the present perfect is determined not by an actual time at which an event took place but by the speaker’s present perspective on the event. So proper understanding of the speaker’s intention is essential to the present perfect.

References

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柏野健次（1999）『テンスとアスペクトの語法』開拓社
Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). A comprehensive grammar of the
Appendix

次の各問いの（　）に入る最も適当なものを1つ選び、その番号で答えなさい。

1. My mother ( ) in the kitchen only a few minutes ago.
   (1) is (2) was (3) has been (4) will be

2. I ( ) you already. I will not tell you again.
   (1) have told (2) told (3) tell (4) will tell

3. Mr. Yamada ( ) to Australia several times when he was young.
   (1) has been (2) was going (3) went (4) goes

4. I'm sorry you can't see my brother. He ( ).
   (1) is still sleeping (2) was sleeping then (3) slept (4) has slept

5. This is one of the most interesting movies that I ( )
   (1) will see (2) ever saw (3) see (4) have ever seen

6. Takeshi ( ) mathematics yesterday.
   (1) studied (2) was studying (3) has studied (4) studies

7. I ( ) dinner with my family when you called me yesterday evening.
   (1) ate (2) have eaten (3) was eating (4) am eating

8. I often played with my dog when I was a child, but he ( ) last year.
   (1) dies (2) died (3) has died (4) will die

9. Megumi ( ) ill in bed for a week now.
   (1) was (2) is (3) will be (4) has been

10. We ( ) each other since we were junior high school students.
    (1) know (2) knew (3) have known (4) will know

11. The newspaper says that it ( ) tomorrow.
    (1) rained (2) rains (3) has rained (4) will rain

    (1) lived (2) will live (3) has lived (4) lives

13. They ( ) from New York. They are going to stay here for a few days.
    (1) just arrived (2) just arrive (3) have just arrived (4) will just arrive

14. I ( ) this dress for you in Paris. Do you like it?
    (1) buy (2) bought (3) am buying (4) have bought

15. Yoko ( ) her leg. She still cannot walk at all.
16. My sister ( ) twelve years old now.
   (1) is  (2) was  (3) will be  (4) has been

17. I ( ) two letters since I ate lunch.
   (1) am writing  (2) was writing  (3) wrote  (4) have written

18. A: I have used this camera for a long time.
   B: When ( ) it?
   (1) have you got  (2) did you get  (3) will you get  (4) do you get

19. A: Where have you been?
   B: I have been to the movies.
   A: What ( )?
   B: “Titanic”.
   A: Was it interesting?
   B: Yes, very much.
   (1) have you seen  (2) do you see  (3) did you see  (4) will you see

20. A: Do you like reading books?
   B: Yes. I like Natsume Soseki very much. He wrote a lot of wonderful novels. Do you like reading books, too?
   A: Yes. I like modern Japanese writers such as Akagawa Jiro. He ( ) a lot of interesting stories. You know, he will come to our school next month.
   (1) writes  (2) has written  (3) will write  (4) wrote

[注] novel 小説, modern 現代の