

L1 transfer in English acquisition by Chinese-speaking learners: a literature review on tense and aspect markers

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Abstract. Fundamental differences exist between the tense-aspect systems of English and Chinese: English primarily expresses temporal meanings through grammatical tense and verbal inflections, whereas Chinese lacks a grammaticalized tense system and relies mainly on aspect markers such as *le*, *zhe*, and *guo*, together with lexical and contextual cues. These differences make L1 transfer a key factor in Chinese learners' acquisition of English tense and aspect. Based on relevant empirical studies, this review examines how Chinese aspect markers influence the acquisition of English tense-aspect forms from the perspectives of language transfer and conceptual transfer. It focuses on the transfer effect of *le*, *guo*, and *zhe* on the past, perfect, and progressive forms. Existing research shows that L1 transfer involves both positive and negative effects, with negative transfer being more systematic, leading to errors such as tense confusion, missing subject–verb agreement, and misuse of non-finite verbs. This review further highlights the growing prominence of conceptual transfer perspectives and summarizes emerging research approaches, including neurolinguistic methods, longitudinal studies, and pedagogical interventions. The findings provide implications for language transfer theory and English tense-aspect teaching for Chinese-speaking learners.

Keywords: L1 transfer, tense and aspect acquisition, Chinese-speaking learners, conceptual transfer, English language learning

1. Introduction

The acquisition of tense and aspect has long been considered a major difficulty in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), as it is shaped by both the characteristics of the target language and learner's First Language (L1). English and Chinese differ significantly in their tense-aspect systems: English expresses temporal meanings through grammatical tense and verbal inflections, while Chinese lacks grammatical tense and mainly relies on aspect markers such as *le*, *zhe*, and *guo*, together with contextual cues [1-3]. These structural differences make L1 transfer a crucial factor affecting Chinese learners' acquisition of English tense and aspect, with both facilitative and problematic effects reported in previous studies [4, 5].

Despite extensive research, the mechanisms underlying L1 transfer in English tense-aspect acquisition remain debated. Existing studies have not fully synthesized how Chinese aspect markers influence the acquisition of English past tense, progressive aspect, and related forms, while the role of cross-linguistic conceptual differences requires further investigation. Therefore, this review examines empirical studies on L1

transfer among Chinese-speaking learners, focusing on the influence of *le*, *zhe*, and *guo* on English tense-aspect acquisition, common transfer errors, and the role of learner proficiency.

This review is based on studies collected from CNKI, Wanfang Data, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2004 to 2024. Keywords used include "L1 transfer", "language transfer", "conceptual transfer", "tense", "aspect marker", "simple past", "*le*", "*zhe*", "*guo*", "Chinese-speaking learners", "English acquisition", etc. The inclusion criteria were: the participants must be Chinese-speaking learners of English; the study must clearly focus on L1 transfer in tense or aspect markers; and it must include empirical data or systematic theoretical analysis.

By integrating existing findings, this paper aims to clarify the mechanisms of Chinese-English tense-aspect transfer, contribute to the discussion of conceptual transfer theory, and provide implications for English tense-aspect teaching.

2. Differences between the English and Chinese tense-aspect systems and L1 transfer theory

The fundamental differences between English and Chinese tense-aspect systems constitute an important source of difficulty for Chinese-speaking learners of English. English possesses a highly grammaticalized tense-aspect system, in which temporal relations and event structure are mainly expressed through verbal inflections and auxiliary constructions with obligatory marking [1, 6]. In contrast, Chinese lacks grammatical tense in the strict sense but relies on aspect markers such as *le*, *zhe*, and *guo*, together with temporal adverbials and contextual information, to indicate temporal meanings [1, 2, 7]. Therefore, Chinese learners need to adjust from a context-dependent temporal system to an explicit tense-marking system when acquiring English.

From the perspective of temporal conceptualization, some scholars argue that English emphasizes explicit temporal reference through tense and aspect, whereas Chinese tends to express temporal relations through aspectual and contextual cues [8]. This difference in temporal conceptualization may lead learners to interpret and produce English tense-aspect forms based on their L1 conceptual patterns, resulting in systematic acquisition difficulties [1].

These cross-linguistic differences form an important basis for L1 transfer. L1 transfer refers to the influence of previously acquired native language knowledge on L2 use, which can manifest either as interfering negative transfer or as facilitative positive transfer [1, 6]. On this basis, the conceptual transfer hypothesis posits that learners may transfer L1-based conceptualization patterns to L2, influencing how they understand and use grammatical forms [8]. Therefore, exploring how Chinese aspect markers affect the acquisition of English tense and aspect through transfer becomes a key pathway to understanding the causes and regularities of Chinese learners' errors.

3. The influence of Chinese aspect markers on the acquisition of English tenses

3.1. The influence of the perfective marker *le* on the acquisition of the English simple past

Among Chinese aspect markers, the relationship between *le* and the English simple past has received the most scholarly attention. Existing studies suggest that *le* produces both positive and negative transfer effects in Chinese learners' acquisition of English past tense. On the one hand, *le* can facilitate the understanding of past-time concepts, as Chinese contexts containing *le* may help learners associate completed events with

English past tense marking [2, 7-11]. Supporting this view, Zhao and Shen found that 75% of English simple past sentences were translated into Chinese sentences containing *le* and vice versa, indicating a certain degree of cross-linguistic correspondence between the two forms [12].

On the other hand, because Chinese lacks grammatical tense and mainly relies on aspect markers and contextual cues, learners may use *le* or temporal adverbs as substitutes for English past tense inflections, resulting in negative transfer errors [1, 7]. The transfer effect of *le* is also influenced by language proficiency and discourse context. Ma's longitudinal study found that *le* showed positive transfer in written narratives but negative transfer in spoken narratives, while its relationship with proficiency followed a non-linear pattern, Zhang further reported that although the influence of *le* decreased with increasing proficiency, fossilized errors remained among advanced learners [13-15]. These findings suggest that difficulties mainly arise from the incomplete correspondence between the perfective meaning of *le* and English past tense or perfect constructions [7, 16].

3.2. The influence of the experiential marker *guo* on the acquisition of English tenses

Compared with *le*, research on *guo* remains relatively limited, partly due to its low frequency in language corpora [2]. Existing studies indicate that *guo* mainly corresponds to English forms expressing past experience, including the simple past, and the present perfect, and the past perfect [17].

From a Chinese-English contrastive perspective, both *guo* and *le* share certain connections with English perfect meanings, but *guo* specifically highlights experiential meaning and frequently appears in spoken contexts, often co-occurring with *cengjing* (ever) to mark past experience [18, 19]. Due to these semantic differences, Chinese learners may experience difficulties in selecting appropriate English tense-aspect forms when expressing past experiences. However, compared with research on *le*, the transfer effects of *guo* require further empirical investigation, particularly through large-scale corpus studies and longitudinal research.

3.3. The influence of the progressive marker *zhe* on the acquisition of the English progressive

The Chinese progressive marker *zhe* also produces both facilitative and interfering effects in the acquisition of the English progressive. When Chinese progressive constructions correspond closely to English progressive contexts, *zhe* can help learners establish the association between ongoing events and progressive marking. However, when English requires progressive marking but Chinese does not use an equivalent marker, learners often show lower accuracy, reflecting negative transfer [20].

This difficulty mainly results from differences in the distribution and usage conditions of progressive marking in two languages. The correspondence rate between Chinese *zhe* and English progressive forms is relatively low, and English applies progressive marking more extensively than Chinese [21]. As a result, Chinese learners tend to underuse progressive forms, while also producing errors such as missing tense marking, overuse of the present progressive, and underuse of the past progressive. Similar difficulties are also observed in non-prototypical progressive contexts, including the use of stative and achievement verbs, where differences between Chinese markers such as *zai* and *zhe* and English progressive structures increase acquisition difficulties [22, 23].

3.4. Typical manifestations of L1 negative transfer in English tense and aspect acquisition

Beyond individual aspect markers, L1 negative transfer is also reflected in broader patterns of English verb production. Based on corpus study, Liu [6] identified five major types of verb-related errors among Chinese learners: (1) verb transitivity errors, where learners, influenced by the fact that most Chinese verbs can directly take an object, mistakenly use English intransitive verbs as transitive (e.g., *arrive the station), (2) subject–

verb agreement errors, where the third-person singular marker is often omitted because Chinese lacks subject-verb inflection (e.g., *He do it), (3) tense mixing, where learners confuse the present and past tenses under the influence of the absence of verbal tense inflection in Chinese (e.g., *I see many things last weekend), (4) non-finite verb errors, where Chinese allows verb serialization, leading to the omission of infinitive or gerund markers (e.g., *I don't mind to do), and (5) voice errors, where unfamiliarity with English passive constructions results in structural mistakes or avoidance of the passive [6].

Further experimental evidence shows that English learners frequently use bare verb forms to express past events and demonstrate greater difficulty with regular verb marking than irregular verb forms. They also tend to rely on Chinese-like resultative constructions when expressing English past events, reflecting the influence of L1 grammatical patterns on L2 production [24].

From the conceptual transfer perspective, these difficulties originate from differences in temporal conceptualization between Chinese and English. Research suggests that Chinese learners often rely on temporal adverbials rather than verbal inflections when interpreting English tense and may associate English auxiliaries, such as "did" with Chinese aspect markers such as *le* and *guo*; lower-proficiency learners are particularly likely to rely on Chinese temporal concepts [8]. In addition, differences in temporal reference patterns between Chinese and English may influence learners' organization of tense information, resulting in errors such as tense mixing and inappropriate temporal expression [3, 16]. Studies further show that advanced learners may transfer Chinese discourse patterns into English production, reflecting the broader influence of L1 conceptualization on L2 expression [21, 25].

4. Research trends and future directions

In recent years, research on tense-aspect transfer among Chinese-speaking learners of English has gradually shifted from identifying formal errors to exploring cognitive mechanisms and developmental processes. First, the conceptual transfer perspective has become increasingly influential. Recent studies have moved beyond surface-level grammatical errors and focused on how differences in temporal conceptualization between Chinese and English influence tense-aspect acquisition [8, 16, 25]. Second, neurolinguistic approaches have provided new methods for investigating the cognitive basis of L1 transfer. For example, ERP-based studies have examined differences in the neural processing of temporal reference involving *le* and *guo*, providing new evidence for understanding the cognitive mechanisms underlying transfer [26]. Third, longitudinal research has attracted increasing attention because it reveals the dynamic nature of transfer development. Existing studies suggest that the influence of L1 transfer does not necessarily decrease linearly with increasing proficiency but may fluctuate throughout the acquisition process [11, 13]. Fourth, pedagogical applications have become an important research direction. Based on identified transfer patterns, researchers have proposed targeted instructional approaches, such as contrastive teaching of Chinese and English tense-aspect systems, to help learners develop greater awareness of English temporal expression and reduce tense-related errors.

Despite these advances, current research still has several limitations. First, many studies involve relatively small samples or limited scopes, which affects the generalizability of conclusions [1, 18]. Second, research on *guo* and *zhe* is far less extensive than on *le* [2, 17]. Third, cross-sectional studies cannot fully capture the dynamic development of transfer, while corpus-based research provides limited access to learners' cognitive processes during production. Therefore, future research should expand participant samples, combine longitudinal and experimental methods, and further investigate the transfer mechanisms of different Chinese aspect markers. In addition, integrating neuroscientific methods into the cognitive foundations of L1 transfer and contributes to more effective pedagogical practices.

5. Conclusion

This review has systematically examined the role of L1 transfer in Chinese-speaking learners' acquisition of English tense and aspect. Due to fundamental differences between the two systems, English relies mainly on obligatory verbal inflections to mark tense and aspect, whereas Chinese expresses temporal relations through aspect markers such as *le*, *zhe*, and *guo*, together with temporal verbs and contextual information. These cross-linguistic differences constitute the core source of acquisition difficulty, with L1 transfer playing a key role in learners' tense-aspect development.

Existing research shows that transfer effects are both facilitative and interfering. Chinese aspect markers such as *le* and *zhe* may promote the acquisition of corresponding English forms in certain contexts, while negative transfer is more widespread, leading learners to rely on Chinese temporal patterns when producing and interpreting English tense-aspect forms. At a deeper level, these difficulties are closely related to differences in temporal conceptualization between Chinese and English, supporting the importance of the conceptual transfer perspective. Moreover, transfer effects are influenced by proficiency and language context; they do not necessarily decline linearly with increased proficiency, and fossilized errors may persist among advanced learners.

This review also identifies several limitations in current research, including the insufficient integration of *guo* and *zhe*, the limited use of longitudinal and quantitative approaches, and the need for deeper exploration of cognitive mechanisms. Future research should combine longitudinal studies, experimental methods, and neurolinguistic methods to further clarify the dynamic nature of L1 transfer. In addition, more attention should be given to pedagogical applications by developing targeted instructional strategies based on Chinese-English tense-aspect differences.

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