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**L1 INFLUENCE IN SIMPLE PAST TENSE ERRORS – THE CASE OF
MANDARIN AND TAMIL ESL LEARNERS BY MIKE TIITTANEN**

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OF MANDARIN AND TAMIL ESL LEARNERS**

Mike Tiittanen

Mike Tiittanen has taught ESL for more than 20 years. In addition, he has been the coordinator of the part-time TESL program at Seneca College for more than 10 years. He completed his PhD in Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University (2011). He is the author of “Brain Waves” (Oxford University Press, 1998), an ESL activity book.

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Abstract

This study investigated the types of errors which Tamil and Mandarin L1 ESL learners made in obligatory contexts for the use of the simple past tense on a fill-in-the-gap task and on two oral tasks. The results of the study indicate that both L1 groups made similar types of mistakes in such contexts (e.g. – the base form). Although learner developmental factors plausibly account for many of the errors, the frequency of some of the types of errors appears to have been influenced by the learners’ L1 as well.



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1. Introduction

There is evidence to support the notion that learner L1 may play a role in the acquisition of the simple past tense in English (Witton-Davies, 2004, pp. 14 + 16; Yang and Huang, 2004; p. 58). However, no studies to date have compared the type of errors that two ESL learner groups with different L1s make in obligatory contexts for the use of the English simple past tense. This study investigated the type of such errors that ESL learners whose L1 is Tamil make in comparison to ESL learners whose L1 is Mandarin. These two learner L1s were chosen for the study because Tamil has a grammatical past tense while Mandarin does not (Annamalai & Steever, 1998, p. 112; Xiao & McEnery, 2004, p. 2).

1.1 Similarities and differences in past tense between English, Mandarin and Tamil

English and Tamil are much more similar to each other than they are to Mandarin in tense marking. Mandarin is almost unanimously regarded as lacking grammatical tense (Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 184; Lin, 2001, pp. 168 – 169; Smith & Erbaugh, 2005, p. 720; Xiao & McEnery, 2004, p. 2) while both Tamil and English have grammatical tense. In both Tamil and English, finite verbs mark tense (Annamalai & Steever, 1998, p. 112; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 95). Both languages can morphologically encode past tense as a suffix to the immediate right of the verb stem (see 1 a + 1 b below):

(1) a. (Tamil) avan-utaiya talai tirump-i:y-atu

he-adjective head turn-past-3sn

b. (English translation of 1a) “His head turned.” (Lehmann, 1989, p. 50)



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2. Literature review

2.1 Cross-linguistic influence in SLA verbal morphopology errors

The possible role of cross-linguistic influence in SLA of verbal morphology errors has not been well researched. Such a role was examined in the ESF study. However, no significant evidence of L1 transfer was found in the ESF study (Perdue Vol. II, 1993, p. 117). The only possible evidence of L1 transfer in the acquisition of temporality within this study is speculative. Amongst the participants, there was sometimes variation in their choice of non-target like verb form in what was considered the basic variety of learner language. Turkish learners preferred the infinitive form in the basic variety while Moroccan Arabic learners preferred the bare stem. It was suggested that “it is not implausible that this preference reflects the rich Turkish suffix morphology compared to the typical stem changes in Arabic ...” (Perdue Vol. II, 1993, p. 116).

3. Research questions

The study investigated the following research questions:

1. What types of errors will Mandarin and Tamil ESL learners make in obligatory contexts for the use of the simple past tense?
2. Will there be a difference in the frequency of types of errors in obligatory contexts for the simple past tense between Mandarin and Tamil learners?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

There were 21 native speakers of Tamil and 21 native speakers of Mandarin who participated in the study. As shown below in Table 1, the Tamil and Mandarin groups were very similar in the gender make-up of their respective groups, their mean age at the time of the study, their mean age of arrival in an English-speaking country and their mean length of residence in an English-speaking country. In terms of gender, the Tamil group consisted of 16 females and 5 males while the Mandarin group consisted of 15 females



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and 6 males. The mean age of the Tamil group at the time of the study was 33.3 years and the mean age of the Mandarin group was 35.7 years. Independent samples t-tests based on participants' age yielded no significant difference between the two groups, $t = (1, 40) = .821, p = .417$. The mean age of arrival in an English-speaking country for the Tamil group was 31.1 years and the mean AoA of the Mandarin group was 34.2 years. This difference was also found to be statistically non-significant by an independent samples t-test, $t = (1, 40) = -1.072, p = .290$. The mean length of residence of the Tamil group was 2.08 years and the mean LOR of the Mandarin group was 1.61 years. An independent samples t-test revealed that the difference in LOR was also statistically non-significant, $t = (1, 40) = .799, p = .483$.

Table 1 – Comparison of participants by L1

	<u>Tamil</u>	<u>Mandarin</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>d</u>
G	16 F, 5 M	15 F, 6 M	n.a.	n.a.
Age M (SD)	33.3 years (11.2)	35.7 years (7.1)	0.417	-.256
AoA M (SD)	31.1 years (11.1)	34.2 years (7.2)	0.291	-.331
LOR M (SD)	2.08 years (2.03)	1.61 years (1.81)	0.429	.244

G = gender, *AoA* = age of arrival in an English-speaking country, *LOR* = length of residence (in years), *p* = statistical significance of t-test, *d* = Cohen's d for effect size

4.2 Data collection

The following data elicitation techniques were utilized: a) the grammar section of the Oxford Placement Test; b) an oral film retell task; c) interview questions; and d) a fill-in-the-gap task. The data was collected from native speakers of Tamil and Mandarin who were primarily in the same ESL level at the researcher's school and other schools where



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the researcher either worked or had access to students. All of the data collection was conducted personally by the researcher. The information below details the methods and order of data collection.

1. student language background form

This questionnaire required the participants to answer questions about their age at the time of the test, age-of-arrival and length of residence. In addition, this form also elicited information about participant gender and other languages known.

2. grammar section of the Oxford Placement Test

The OPT grammar test is a timed 50 minute multiple choice exam which consists of a variety of different grammatical structures. On the exam, there are 100 multiple choice items, each of which have three different choices (Water **is to boil** / **is boiling** / **boils** at 100°C.). This test was timed (50 minutes).

3. Film retell task

For this task, the researcher showed the participants an ESL video which is approximately 7 minutes in length long. Before showing the 7 minute ESL video about a man who joins a health club, the researcher pre-taught some of the vocabulary to all of the participants individually. This pre-taught vocabulary was the same for all participants and these words were available to the participant during the film retell on the blackboard or on a piece of paper. When the video was shown, the participants were not allowed to take notes. The video was shown twice and the researcher left the room both times that the participant watched the video in order to hopefully make the film retell task seem more authentic to the participants (Perdue Vol. I, 1993, pp. 105 – 106). To reduce the possibility of having the participants forget the events of the video, the film retell task was conducted immediately after he/she had watched the video twice.



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4. Interview questions

The researcher asked all of the questions on the interview questions schedule (please see Appendix A). However, when deemed appropriate, further questions were asked in an attempt to hopefully elicit more verb tokens in obligatory simple past tense environments and to add a greater natural coherence to the sequence of questions.

5. Fill-in-the-gap task

The fill-in-the-gap task required the use of the simple past tense for sixteen different verbs (see Appendix A) as well as ten distractors. In order to make it likely that the participants would have encountered the simple past tense forms, all of the target simple past tense forms are on the list of the 200 most common simple past tense forms in American National Corpus (Davies, 2008). All of the lemmas that the target simple past tense forms belong to are also within the 900 most frequent lemmas of American English based on the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies, 2008). This was an untimed activity and no exam aids were allowed.

4.3 Data analysis

The data from the data elicitation techniques was analysed in the following manner:

1. OPT grammar test

Each test item was marked as being either correct or incorrect.

2. Film retell task

The present study conducted a token analysis rather than a type analysis of the verbs used in the film retell task. Verb tokens in obligatory simple past tense contexts were marked as being either correct, incorrect, or partially correct. Partially correct marks were given to verbs that were uttered both correctly and incorrectly in the same



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utterance as in self-corrections (e.g. - I go, went to the store). In addition, repetitions of the same verb were counted only once (e.g. – I go, go to the store). Thus, multiple tokens in contexts of self-corrections and repetitions were treated as single obligatory contexts for the use of the simple past rather than as multiple obligatory contexts for the simple past tense. In addition, when the participants' pronunciation was unintelligible, a score was not given to the verb as the intended form was not evident.

3. Interview questions

The same analysis for the data generated from the interview questions was undertaken as for the film retell task.

4. Fill-in-the-gap task

Participants' answers on the target simple past tense verbs were counted as being 'correct', 'incorrect' (e.g. – “choose” instead of “chose”) or 'half-correct' (e.g. – “choosed” instead of “chose”). “Minor” spelling errors were ignored and counted as correct if the intention of the participant to use the simple past tense was clear and the form was still easily recognizable (e.g. – “stoped” instead of “stopped”). Overregularizations of irregular simple past tense verbs (e.g. – “drived” instead of “drove”) were counted as half-correct because the intention of the participant to use the simple past tense was evident although the form was incorrect. “Major” spelling errors were counted as incorrect if it appeared that the intention to use the simple past tense may not be clear out of context (e.g. – “fund” instead of “found”).

5. Results

5.1 OPT grammar test results

As shown below in Bar graph 1 and Table 2, the OPT grammar test results of the Mandarin group and the Tamil group were very similar. The Mandarin learners had a mean score of 53.1 % on the OPT grammar test and the Tamil learners had a mean score



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of 49.8 %. A t-test of independent samples revealed that this difference was statistically non-significant, $t = (1, 40) = .708, p = .483$.

Bar Graph 1 – OPT grammar test results by L1

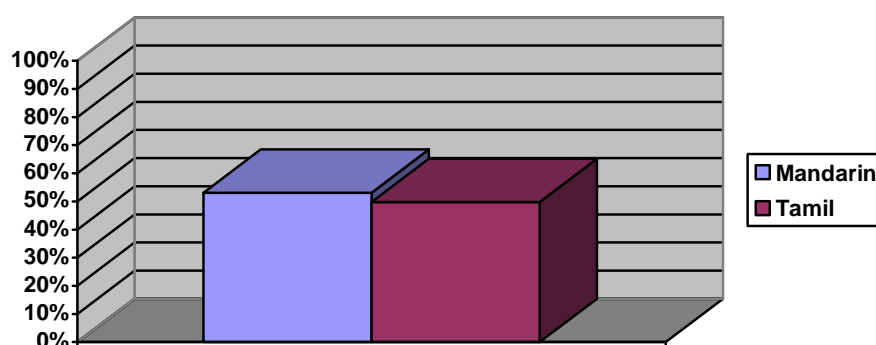


Table 2 – OPT grammar test results by L1

<u>L1</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean score</u>	<u>Standard deviation</u>	<u>t value</u>	<u>p value</u>
Mandarin	21	53.1 %	15.3	.708	.483
Tamil	21	49.8%	15.3		

5.2 Types of mistakes on the fill-in-the-gap task

The learners' mistakes on the fill-in-the-gap task were considered to be those mistakes for which a full mark or a partial mark was deducted. These mistakes were categorized into 47 different types of mistakes (see Table 3 below for the most frequently occurring types of mistakes). The most common major mistake for both the Mandarin learners and the Tamil learners was the base form, which accounted for 25.7 % of the Mandarin total and 35.8% of the Tamil total.



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There were some differences between the learners in the frequency of some of the mistakes they made. The Mandarin participants used overregularizations more frequently than the Tamil participants – the Mandarin group’s use of overregularizations accounted for 24.5% of their total mistakes while this type of error only accounted for 8.0% of the Tamil total mistakes. This L1 difference was statistically significant ($p = .027$; $z = -2.212$; Mann-Whitney test).

One difference which was analysed was the number of mistakes the participants made with all VERB-ING forms (i.e. - past progressive, verb-ing, present progressive, and letters transposed and verb-ING) (see Table 4 below). Although this mistake supra-category accounted for 19.9 % of all the Tamil errors and for 10.0% of the Mandarin total errors, this difference was non-significant ($p = .082$; $z = -1.742$; Mann-Whitney test).

Table 3 - Types of errors in the fill-in-the-gap task¹

<u>Type of Error and Statistical Significance of L1 Difference</u>	<u>Mandarin</u>		<u>Tamil</u>		<u>Total (of both L1s)</u>	
	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>
Base form $p = .125$ $z = -1.535$	31.0	1.48 (2.18)	63.0	3.00 (3.08)	94.0	2.24 (2.75)
Overregularization $p = .027$ $z = -2.212$	29.5 ²	1.41 (1.30)	14.0	.67 (1.11)	43.5 ³	1.04 (.25)
Past progressive $p = .441$ $z = -.771$	10.0	.48 (1.57)	16.0	.76 (1.79)	26.0	.62 (1.67)
Verb- ING	2.0	.10	15.0	.71	17.0	.41

¹ All numbers are the raw numbers of mistakes produced by the learners regardless of whether a full mark or a partial mark was deducted. In one case, however, no mark was deducted as the participant had written down both an overgeneralization and the correct answer as the answer).

² One of the participants wrote an overregularized form and the correct answer for the same item.

³ One of the participants wrote an overregularized form and the correct answer for the same item.



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p = .086 z = -1.716		(.44)		(2.03)		(1.48)
Past perfect p = .173 z = -1.364	9.0	.43 (1.17)	3.0	.14 (.65)	12.0	.29 (.94)
Past participle	6.0	.29 (.90)	4.0	.19 (.51)	10.0	.24 (.73)
Wrong vowel – irregular verb	4.0	.19 (.40)	2.0	.10 (.30)	6.0	.14 (.35)
Present perfect	3.0	.14 (.36)	3.0	.14 (.36)	6.0	.14 (.35)
Was/were + past tense	4.0	.19 (.87)	1.0	.05 (.22)	5.0	.12 (.63)
Simple present	0	0 (0)	5.0	.24 (.44)	5.0	.12 (.33)
Incorrect inflection – simple present	0	0 (0)	5.0	.24 (.62)	5.0	.12(.45)
<u>Type of Error and Statistical Significance of L1 Difference</u>	<u>Mandarin</u>		<u>Tamil</u>		<u>Total (of both L1s)</u>	
	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>
Similar irregular verb used (i.e. – “drew” for “drove”)	0	0 (0)	5.0	.24 (.70)	5.0	.12(.50)
Present perfect like form	3.0	.14 (.36)	2.0	.10 (.30)	5.0	.12 (.33)
Past participle- type form	0	0 (0)	4.0	.19 (.51)	4.0	.10 (.37)
Past perfect-like form	2.0	.10 (.30)	1.0	.05 (.22)	3.0	.07 (.26)
<i> or <y> missing (i.e. –	1.0	.05 (.22)	2.0	.10 (.44)	3.0	.07 (.34)



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Present progressive	0	0 (0)	3.0	.14 (.65)	3.0	.07 (.46)
No answer	1.0	.05 (.22)	2.0	.10 (.44)	3.0	.07 (.34)
Be (simple present tense) + base form	0	0 (0)	3.0	.14 (.48)	3.0	.07 (.34)
Misspelling of irregular verb (i.e. – <i>spock</i> for <i>spoke</i>)	0	0 (0)	3.0	.14 (.48)	3.0	.07 (.34)
Wrong verb used	1.0	.05 (.22)	2.0	.10 (.30)	3.0	.07 (.26)
Total	120.5		176		296.5	

Table 4 – Superordinate category: ALL verb-ING mistakes in the fill-in-the-gap task

<u>Type of Error and Statistical Significance of L1 Difference</u>	<u>Mandarin</u>		<u>Tamil</u>		<u>Total (of both L1s)</u>	
	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>	<u>SUM</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>
ALL verb-ING p = .082 z = -1.742	12.0	.57 (1.99)	35.0	1.67 (3.48)	47.0	1.12 (2.86)

5.3 Types of errors on the oral tasks

On both the film retell task and the interview questions, both Tamil and Mandarin participants made similar types of mistakes (see Bar graphs 2 and 3 as well as Tables 5 and 6 below for the most frequently occurring types of mistakes) in their undersuppliance of the simple past tense. On both tasks, for both L1 groups, the most common type of error was the use of the base form in obligatory simple past tense environments. On the film retell task, Mandarin participants used the base form 69.76 % of the time and Tamil participants used the base form 62.38 % of the time. This L1 difference was not



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statistically significant, however ($p = .295$; $t = 1.065$; independent samples t-test). On the interview questions, the Mandarin group had almost the same exact proportion of mistakes with the base form (69.19%) as on the film retell task. However, on this task, the Tamil learners made fewer mistakes with the base form (52.1%) than on the film retell task. There was a statistically significant difference between the two L1 groups in their use of the base form in the interview questions ($p < .01$; $z = -3.158$; Mann-Whitney). In addition, the effect size was also quite robust ($r = .44$).

The second most frequently made error for both L1 groups on both tasks was the use of the simple present tense. On the film retell task, Mandarin participants used this verb form in 21.25% for all of their undersupplied forms and the Tamil participants used it a mean of 18.68% of the time in obligatory contexts for the simple past. This difference was not statistically significant ($p = .198$; $z = -1.29$; Mann-Whitney). On the interview questions, both groups used the simple present more frequently than on the film retell. Mandarin learners used the simple present 23.86 % of the time and Tamil learners used it 31.14% of the time. This difference was also statistically non-significant ($p = .110$; $z = -1.598$; Mann-Whitney).

The other most frequently made errors on both tasks were two superordinate categories, which were devised because of the morphosyntactic similarity of the verb forms to each other and because both superordinate categories involve verb inflection, which may be relevant for my study given the fact that Mandarin lacks verb inflection while the Tamil language has verb inflection. The superordinate category, ALL verb-ING, consists almost exclusively of the following verb forms: present progressive, past progressive and verb-ing (e.g. – talking). However, there were also a few tokens of the form *be* (both present and past) and verb-ing (e.g. – “are, were landing”), which were included in this superordinate category. All members of this superordinate category bear a morphological similarity to one another. On the film retell, the Tamil participants made these types of errors for 12.71% for all of their errors while the Mandarin participants had only a mean of 3.71%. This difference was not statistically significant, however ($p =$



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.072; $z = -1.80$; Mann-Whitney). On the interview questions, the Tamil learners made twice as many errors as the Mandarin learners as a proportion of their errors with ALL verb-ING. 6.28% of the Tamil mistakes were with ALL verb-ING while 3.06% of the Mandarin errors were this error category. This difference was statistically significant ($p < .05$; $t = -2.236$; independent samples t-test). In addition, the effect size was close to a large value ($d = -.69$). In terms of the differences between the L1 groups for the individual categories of this superordinate category, most of these differences were statistically non-significant. However, the difference between the groups in the use of the past progressive in the interview questions was statistically significant ($p < .05$; $z = -2.074$; Mann-Whitney test). In this task, the Mandarin learners did not use any past progressive tokens in the obligatory context of the simple past whereas 2.36 % of the Tamil mistake tokens were in past progressive form. In addition, the effect size for this form was of a medium value ($r = -0.27$). Moreover, on the film retell task, the present progressive was used more frequently by the Tamil learners as a proportion of their mistakes than by the Mandarin learners. This difference came close to reaching statistical significance ($p = .056$; $z = 1.91$; Mann-Whitney test).

On the interview questions, ALL be + VERB was a more common error for the Tamil learners than for the Mandarin learners. This type of mistake accounted for 5.42% of all of the Tamil learners' errors in the interview questions, but it only accounted for 2.13% of the Mandarin learners' mistakes. This difference was statistically significant ($p < .05$; $z = -2.113$; Mann-Whitney test) and the effect size was of a medium size ($r = -.33$). However, none of the L1 differences within the various forms in this superordinate category that were analysed were statistically significant. In contrast to the interview questions, on the film retell task, the Tamil L1 group had a more similar proportion of mistakes with ALL be + VERB forms to the Mandarin L1 group. This category accounted for 4.2 % of all of the Mandarin learners' mistakes and 5.7 % of all of the Tamil learners' mistakes. This difference was not statistically significant ($p = .881$; $z = -.150$; Mann-Whitney).



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Bar graph 2 – Film retell; frequencies of major types of mistakes

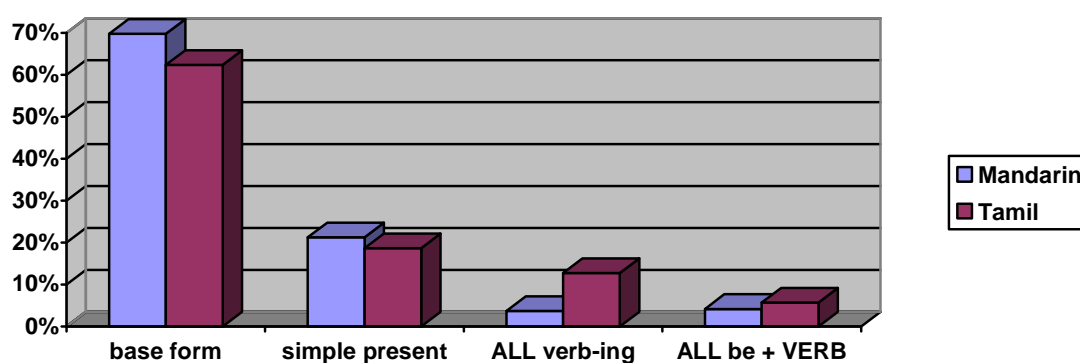


Table 5 - Film retell – types and percentage frequencies of mistakes

<u>Type of mistake</u>	<u>Mandarin</u> (N = 21) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>	<u>Tamil</u> (N = 21) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>	<u>L1 Statistical differences</u>	<u>All participants</u> (N = 42) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>
Base form	69.76% (15.02) 259.83	62.38% (28.00) 248.17	p = .293 t = 1.065 d = .329	66.10 (22.51) 508
Simple present	21.25% (12.42) 33.5	18.68% (22.00) 92.2	p = .198 z = - 1.29 r = .073	19.97 (17.69) 125.7
<i>ALL verb-ING⁴</i>	3.71% (7.20) 13.34	12.71% (20.44) 69.5	p = .072 z = - 1.80 r = -.282	8.21 (15.81) 82.84
Present progressive	.97% (3.22) 3	5.46% (10.63) 43	p = .056 z = 1.91 r = -.275	3.21 (8.08) 46
Past progressive	1.54% (4.94) 6	3.46% (14.55) 9	p = 1.00 z = .00 r = -.088	2.50 (10.77) 15
Verb-ING	1.20% (2.93)	3.80% (5.63)	p = .075 z = - 1.78	2.50 (4.62)

⁴ This is a superordinate category consisting of verb-ING, present progressive and past progressive tokens.



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	<i>4.34</i>	<i>17.5</i>	<i>r = -.278</i>	<i>21.84</i>
<u>Type of mistake</u>	<u>Mandarin</u> (N = 21) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>	<u>Tamil</u> (N = 21) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>	<u>L1 Statistical differences</u>	<u>All participants</u> (N = 42) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>
<i>ALL be + VERB⁵</i>	4.18% (5.77) <i>15.67</i>	5.68% (9.73) <i>30.84</i>	p = .881 z = -.150 r = -.093	4.93 (7.94) <i>46.51</i>
Be(present tense) and base form	2.80% (4.61) <i>9.67</i>	3.79% (6.99) <i>24</i>	p = .920 z = -.101 r = -.083	3.29 (5.87) <i>33.67</i>
Be(past tense) and base form	.57% (1.83) <i>2</i>	.81% (3.15) <i>2</i>	p = 1.000 z = .000 r = -.047	.69 (2.54) <i>4</i>
Be (present tense) and past tense	.10% (.34) <i>1</i>	.83% (2.22) <i>4</i>	p = .301 z = -1.033 r = -.224	.46 (1.61) <i>5</i>
<i>Total number of all mistake tokens</i>	<i>379.83</i>	<i>443.71</i>		<i>823.54</i>

⁵ This is a superordinate category consisting of be(present tense) and base form, be(simple past) and base form, be(present tense) and past tense, be(past tense) and past tense, be(present tense) and past participle, be(present) and base form + infinitive, be(past tense) and infinitive and be(present) and past tense or base form



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Bar graph 3 – Interview questions; frequencies of major types of mistakes

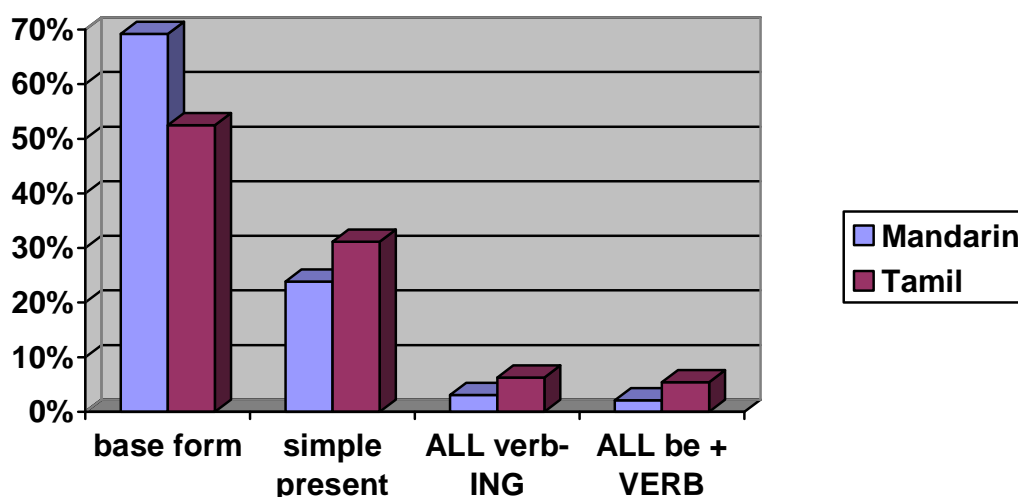


Table 6 - Interview questions – types and percentage frequencies of mistakes

<u>Type of mistake</u>	<u>Mandarin</u> (N = 21) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>	<u>Tamil</u> (N = 21) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>	<u>L1 statistical differences</u>	<u>All participants</u> (N = 42) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>
Base form	69.19% (13.30) 653.09	52.51% (20.35) 445.17	p = .002 z = -3.158 r = .44	60.85 (18.96) 1098.26
Simple present	23.86% (12.76) 237.5	31.14% (18.11) 216.5	p = .110 z = -1.598 r = -.23	27.50 (15.90) 454
<i>ALL verb-ING</i> ⁶	3.06% (3.48) 25.5	6.28% (5.60) 38.5	p = .032 t = -2.236 d = -.69	4.67 (4.89) 64
Verb-ING	1.87% (2.40)	2.50% (3.54)	p = .833 z = -.211	2.18 (3.00)

⁶ This is a superordinate category consisting of verb-ING, present progressive, past progressive tokens and be (past + present) and verb-ing.



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	<i>17.5</i>	<i>16.5</i>	<i>r = -.10</i>	<i>34</i>
Present progressive	1.15% (2.61) 7	1.42% (2.33) 17	p = .528 z = -.631 r = -.05	1.29 (2.45) 24
<u>Type of mistake</u>	<u>Mandarin</u> (N = 21) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>	<u>Tamil</u> (N = 21) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>	<u>L1 statistical differences</u>	<u>All participants</u> (N = 42) M (SD) <i>total number of mistake tokens</i>
Past progressive	0% (0) 0	2.36% (5.85) 5	p = .038 z = -2.074 r = -.27	1.18 (4.26) 5
<i>ALL be + VERB⁷</i>	2.13% (3.67) 16.67	5.42% (5.47) 43.5	p = .035 z = -2.113 r = -.33	3.78 (4.89) 60.17
Be(present tense) and base form	1.01% (2.13) 10	2.49% (4.52) 23	p = .262 z = -1.121 r = -.20	1.75 (3.57) 33
Be (present tense) and past tense	.68% (1.60) 4	1.25% (1.80) 9	p = .120 z = -1.556 r = -.17	.96 (1.71) 13
Be(past tense) and base form	.40% (1.49) 2	.91% (2.03) 6	p = .374 z = -.889 r = -.14	.66 (1.78) 8
Present perfect	.35% (1.17) 2	3.02% (13.08) 4	p = .961 z = -.049 r = -.14	1.69 (9.27) 6
Simple present wrongly inflected	.19% (.79) 1.25	.84% (1.91) 6	p = .194 z = -1.298 r = -.22	.51 (1.48) 7.25
<i>Total number of all mistakes</i>	<i>945.5</i>	<i>759.17</i>		<i>1704.67</i>

6. Discussion

6.1 Interlanguage declarative knowledge – types of errors on the fill-in-the-gap task

⁷ This is a superordinate category consisting of be(present tense) and base form, be(simple past) and base form, be(present tense) and past tense, be(past tense) and past tense, be(past) and irregular verb mispronounced, be(present) and infinitive, and be(present) and past tense or base form.



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The errors that the learners made in obligatory contexts for the simple past tense on the fill-in-the-gap task may possibly yield insight into the participants' interlanguage declarative knowledge. The most common incorrect form that both Tamil and Mandarin learners used was the base form, which is consistent with previous studies of the interlanguage production of the simple past tense by ESL learners at the less advanced stages of verb development (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, p. 37; Housen, 2002, p. 160). This is in line with Housen's observation that low proficiency L2 learners often substitute the least marked form structurally and semantically for all forms in a verbal inflectional paradigm (2002, p. 160). The base form is not marked for tense/aspect and may perhaps in this sense be the least marked semantically. In addition, lacking any inflection, the base form lacks any morphological marking and may be considered to be the least marked structurally.

Another common mistake that learners from both L1s made on the fill-in-the-gap task was the overregularization of irregular verbs. There are a number of different possible explanations for this type of error. The overregularizations may possibly simply indicate that the participants had not learned the irregular past tense verbs of some verbs. Another possible explanation for the overregularization of irregular verbs is U-shaped learning by L2 learners (Kellerman, 1985). According to this model, there are three stages in acquiring a new construction. In the first stage, irregular verbs are used correctly. In the second stage, learners develop an understanding of the regularity of the regular past tense and begin to regularize irregular verbs. It is not until the third stage that both regular and irregular verbs are constructed correctly (Taatgen & Andersen, 2002, p. 124). Another possible explanation for the frequency of overregularization errors is the dual route paradigm. These results are consistent with the dual route paradigm, which suggests that learners first attempt to locate the irregular form within their mental lexicon. If it cannot be found, then learners apply the regular past tense rule (McClelland & Patterson, 2002, p. 466).



6.2 Types of errors in oral production of verbs in obligatory past tense environments

The types of errors that the participants of this study made appeared to reflect both developmental and L1 influences. With regard to possible developmental factors, most of the mistakes that both Tamil and Mandarin-speaking participants made on both the film retell task and the interview questions were the use of a verb that had the same form as the simple present tense or the base form (or both). This result is consistent with research conducted by Bardovi-Harlig (1998) who found that the base form was the most common error form used by her participants for the simple past. However, this result interacted with level as her lower level participants made this mistake more frequently than higher level participants (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, pp. 248 – 249). Thus, it is possible that the level of the participants in the current study may have played a role in this particular result.

A possible contributing factor in the fact that the base form (or a form resembling the base form) was the most common error for both L2 groups on both oral tasks is suggested by non-L2 psycholinguistic research on affixes. This research appears to indicate that speakers process verb stems before suffixes. That is, within production, speakers will compute verb stems before they compute suffixes (Hawkins & Gilligan, 1988, p. 240). If this is true, it is possible that because of implicit time pressure in oral communication to produce the verb involved, the participants may often have only had time to process the verb stem rather than both the verb stem and the suffix. For regular verbs the verb stem is the same as the base form. Therefore, this theory would plausibly account for this kind of errors with regular verbs.

Another type of mistake which may reflect developmental influence was the oversuppliance of the verb-ing marker in obligatory simple past tense contexts. Previous child SLA studies have found oversuppliance of the progressive form in obligatory contexts for the simple past tense (Rohde, 2002, p. 204). It is possible that adult L2 learners may also exhibit this pattern. A possible factor in the frequency of this kind of error may include the lexical aspect of the verbs for which the “-ing” form was



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incorrectly used. A multitude of L2 studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig & Bergström, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds 1995; Giacalone Ramat 1995, 1997; Robison, 1995; Shirai, 1995; Shirai & Kurono, 1998) have found that language learners of various target languages, including English, very frequently or primarily use progressive forms with activities (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, pp. 361 – 362).

An investigation into the influence of lexical aspect and the ALL verb-ING errors revealed that both L1 groups were more likely to use these error forms with primarily activities and accomplishments. This result is consistent with the Aspect Hypothesis, which predicts that progressive forms first appear on activities and then spread to accomplishments (Li and Shirai, 2000, p. 50). These results support Housen’s findings on the strong connection between inherent aspect and *-ing* markers (2002: 186).

In addition to exhibiting developmental patterns, some of the errors may also reflect L1 interference. The differences in frequency between three out of the four most common types of errors in the interview questions appear to reflect differences in L1 morphological structure. In the interview questions the Mandarin learners made more errors with the base form than the Tamil learners. The base form is similar to the morphological structure of Mandarin verbs in that verbs in Mandarin are not inflected for tense. Similarly, the Tamil participants made more errors with ALL verb-ING errors (i.e. – verb-ing, present progressive, past progressive) and ALL be + VERB forms (e.g. – is go, was go, is went, was went) in the interview questions than the Mandarin participants. Both of these superordinate categories resemble Tamil verb forms in that that they have at least one verb inflected for tense within the verb phrase. With all of the ALL verb-ING forms, the verb-ING minus the auxiliary is inflected with the morpheme “-ing”. In addition, for all of the sub-categories of this form except for the bare verb-ING form, the auxiliary verb “be” is inflected either for past tense or present tense, similar to Tamil verbs which are inflected for tense. Similarly, in all of the ALL be + VERB forms, the auxiliary verb “be” is inflected for either present tense or past tense. In addition, many of the main verb tokens of this category were inflected for past tense as well.



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It is possible that the Tamil learners who oversupplied the verb-ing marker in various forms (as a bare verb or with the inflected be auxiliary) may have been misapplying L1 input they had noticed with the past progressive in past contexts to obligatory simple past tense contexts. The Tamil learners' oversuppliance of the progressive morpheme may possibly be explained by the Transfer to Somewhere principle. All three preconditions for the possible application of the Transfer to Somewhere principle appear to hold: 1) Tamil has progressive aspect suffixes which can combine with past tense suffixes (Asher 1982: 163); 2) English has past progressive forms which appear as input to the Tamil learners; and 3) paying attention to the ends of words has been asserted to be a natural acquisitional principle (Odlin, 2003, p. 455) and the "-ing" morpheme appears at the ends of words. Thus, it is possible that the Transfer to Somewhere principle may be responsible for at least some of the oversuppliance of verb-ing markers by the Tamil participants.

It is also possible that the much more infrequent oversuppliance of the progressive markers by the Mandarin participants may be reasonably explained by the fact that although both preconditions 2 and 3 above would apply to the Mandarin participants as well, precondition 1 does not. Namely, although Mandarin does have a progressive grammatical morpheme ('*zai*') (Xiao & McEnery, 2004, p. 205) it lacks a grammatical past tense (Yang & Huang, 2004, p. 52). Therefore, the structure of Mandarin would preclude the application of the Transfer to Somewhere principle for the English past progressive.

One common error category which was not more frequently used by either L1 groups was the simple present tense. One factor which may have played a role in this is that the most common verb which was inflected for the simple present tense by both L1 groups was "be". Some researchers have asserted that "be" attracts tense marking more than other verbs (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, p. 500). It is possible that if the claims about "be" attracting tense are true, the nature of "be" may explain why there was not a difference in the suppliance of the simple present tense by the two groups.



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7. Conclusion

Although the types of errors that both L1 groups made were similar, L1 appeared to influence some of these non-target like attempts. This is suggested by the fact that in the interview questions task the Mandarin group made more errors using the base form instead of the simple past tense while the Tamil group made more errors using some of the ALL verb-ING and ALL be + verb supra-categories rather than the simple past tense. In addition, lexical aspect appears to have influenced at least one of the error types in the oral tasks (i.e – verb-ing) that both L1 groups made. Thus, overall, the results appear to indicate that the kind of errors which the participants made was influenced by both developmental influences as well as L1 influence.

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Appendix A

Film retell task

Please tell me everything that you remember that happened in the video from the beginning.

Interview Questions

1. What's your (full) name?
2. a) What do you normally like to do on the weekend?
 - b) What did you do you last weekend?
 - c) What sort of hobbies do you have?
3. a) Let's talk about school now. What was your favourite subject in high school? (Why?)
 - b) i. Did you study English in your first country?
 - ii. (If 'yes' to above question) Did you like studying English in (country)? Why/why not?

(If 'no' to above question) When you first started studying English in Canada, did you like studying English? Why/why not?
4. a) Where were you born?



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- b) When did you immigrate to Canada?
- c) Do you remember your trip to Canada? Can you tell me about it?
- d) Do you remember your first day in Canada? What happened?
- e) If you don't mind my asking, why did you immigrate here?
5. Can you tell me about a trip you took to another country or city?
6. Are you married?
- i. (If "yes") Can you tell me about your wedding day?
- ii. (If "no") Can you tell me about another person's wedding celebration you attended?

Fill-in-the-gap task

Please fill in the correct forms of the verbs in the blanks below:

I really 1. like (like) traveling. My friends often 2. _____ (ask) me why I enjoy traveling so much. I usually 3. _____ (tell) them that I 4. _____ (believe) that traveling to other countries is a good experience. I have visited many countries, but until last year I 5. _____ never _____ (be) to England. I 6. _____ (know) people in England who often ask me to visit them there.

Last year my brother was working in England, and he 7. _____ (tell) me he missed me very much. I 8. _____ (decide) to go there to visit him during my winter holidays. My brother often writes to me but I 9. _____ not _____ (see) him for several years. This way I could see my brother and also see England.

My brother was in London at that time, so I 10. _____ (call) the travel agency where my friend worked to buy a ticket to London on the date I preferred (July 2). The travel agency did not have any more flights to London on July 2, so I went to look on the internet. On the internet I could not find any more flights on that date, but I 11. _____ (continue) looking for some time. I still couldn't find any flights with available seats on that date, so I 12. _____ (choose) a flight on July 3 instead. I 13. _____ (see) that Air Canada offered the best price. Because Air Canada offered the best price, I purchased a ticket with them. However, I was a little worried because I 14. _____ (need) to pay with my credit card and I am generally worried



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about the security of my credit card number. But I 15. _____ (buy) a ticket on this flight because I 16. _____ (know) I could not afford anything more expensive.

On the day of the flight, my friend 17. _____ (drive) me to the airport. I 18. _____ (get) to the airport early. The first thing I did at the airport was I went to the Air Canada desk. At the Air Canada desk, the Air Canada employee 19. _____ (ask) to see my electronic ticket. Unfortunately, I had lost my ticket. I was really worried that I would 20. _____ (miss) my flight. However, I was worried for nothing. I 21. _____ (show) the Air Canada employee my passport. Then he 22. _____ (give) me another ticket.

Before my flight, I had to find something to do, so I 23. _____ (watch) TV in a bar at the airport. I also 24. _____ (play) some video games and 25. _____ (write) in my diary. I was also a little bit hungry, so I 26. _____ (eat) in a coffee shop. At the coffee shop, I 27. _____ (study) my university textbook. An hour and a half before my flight, I 28. _____ (walk) to the security gate. At the security gate, I 29. _____ (stand) in line for a long time. When it was finally my turn, I handed the security guard my ticket. He examined it very carefully. I 30. _____ (feel) nervous because I didn't know why he was looking at it like that. Finally, he said in a loud voice, "The date for this ticket 31. _____ (be) wrong!" He 32. _____ (look) angry. I 33. _____ (start) to talk, but before I could finish my sentence, he 34. _____ (stop) me at once by saying "Oh, I'm sorry! I made a mistake! I 35. _____ (think) it was Saturday."

I was really angry! I was going to make a complaint about him, but I didn't because I just 36. _____ (want) to go to the gate that my flight was leaving from. So, after going through the security gate, I just 37. _____ (find) the gate that my flight was leaving from. While I was waiting there, I talked to one of the other passengers waiting there. He was from France, so I 38. _____ (speak) French with him to practice my French.

The flight was mostly OK, but as the first movie was ending, the plane began to shake up and down, and one of the passenger's bags 39. _____ (fall) down. All this caused me 40. _____ (feel) scared.

When the flight finally 41. _____ (arrive) in London, I was so happy. I can't honestly say that I 42. _____ (enjoy) this flight. When the plane was finally on the ground, I said to myself "I 43. _____ never _____ (forget) this trip!"