

ADULT L2 PROCESSING AND ACQUISITION OF THE ENGLISH PRESENT PERFECT

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This research investigates the second language (L2) processing and acquisition of the English present perfect via two features: boundedness and current relevance. Boundedness indicates whether an action reaches an endpoint (Smith 1997; Verkuyl 1972); it divides the functions of the present perfect into sets that denote completed situations or ongoing/iterative ones (Bybee et al. 1994; Housen 2002). Current relevance indicates the present importance of a past situation (Siemund 2004); it differentiates the present perfect from the simple past (Bardovi-Harlig 2002). Previous research has relied on offline methods (that evaluate metalinguistic knowledge); no research has investigated the acquisition of the present perfect using online methods (that measure real-time processing). This investigation addresses this gap using two novel tasks.

In this study, 155 adult L2 English learners of varying proficiency from three first language (L1) backgrounds (Arabic, Chinese & Other) participated; 72 L1 English speakers were controls. Online data were collected using a self-paced reading task wherein participants read sentences manipulated for grammatical tense & boundedness and for grammatical tense & current relevance. Reading time differences for each condition were analyzed by L2 proficiency and L1 group. Offline data were collected using a rating task wherein participants provide judgments concerning the meanings of phrases excerpted from similarly manipulated sentences. Rating differences were analyzed by L2 proficiency and L1 group.

We conclude that boundedness and current relevance affect L2 English learners' processing and comprehension of the present perfect; first language and L2 proficiency influence these effects. In boundedness conditions, high-proficiency learners exhibit inhibited reading times in nonbounded contexts, and they more accurately rate boundedness contrasts in the present perfect. These results suggest that advanced learners can distinguish the functions of the present perfect. The Arabic group performs like higher-proficiency learners, which indicates positive L1 transfer. In current relevance conditions, only the highest proficiency group exhibits reading times affected by current relevance marking, and they understand current relevance contrasts marked adverbially and morphosyntactically; less proficient groups only comprehend current relevance contrast marked adverbially. These results suggest that less proficient learners can use adverbially marked current relevance to distinguish the present perfect and simple past; only at higher proficiency do they become sensitive to morphosyntactic current relevance marking. The Chinese group unexpectedly performs like lower proficiency learners, which indicates negative L1 transfer.