



Tense and Aspect Difficulties Faced by Malaysian Chinese Students: A Case Study

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Abstract: This study examines the written production of a group of Malaysian Chinese students when they were in the middle of their second semester of their Spanish language under graduate program at University of Malaya (UM). More specifically, this study employs Error Analysis to determine the type of errors committed in verb tenses when they were in Spanish III. The errors were classified according to the different grammatical functions they served. The results revealed that the misconception of verb tenses and aspect in Spanish have nothing to do with the languages they speak or how inflected the target language(s) may be, but that are rather influenced by other different and yet interrelated aspects in Second Language Acquisition such as: *linguistic input* and *individual differences*. This raises crucial theoretical questions as to whether L2 acquisition is influenced by the environmental factors that govern the input to which learners are exposed, or of internal mental factors which somehow dictate how learners acquire grammatical structures. Moreover, it was found that if problems in understanding and using verb tenses and aspects correctly and appropriately in Spanish are to be attributable to one phenomenon, that phenomenon is *intraference* and not so much *interference*.

Key words: intraference, interference, interlanguage continuum, creative construction hypothesis, linguistic input, output, fossilization, mistake, error, tense, aspect.

1. Introduction

Teachers of a second or third language must know that the learning process in the acquisition of a foreign language is a succession of different stages ranging from the simplest to the most complex, in which the learner adds, deletes and restructures his grammar rules. In other words, “this **interlanguage continuum** is the construct through which the learner will internalize the norms that make up a language as a means of communication” Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams (2003: 360). These set of grammatical, lexical and functional tools will help him develop his linguistic and communication strategies at any particular point in time.

Teachers might wonder why students repeat the same errors and what it can be done to help them overcome such errors. The problem is that until now it has not been possible to construct a theory that can comprehensively and reliably explain the errors occurring during the acquisition/learning of a foreign or second language (FLA – SLA/L2). This is fundamentally due to the fact that the phenomenon is very complex and the studies in the area are relatively new. Furthermore, it was not until the end of the 1960’s that theoreticians began to understand errors produced by foreign language learners.

Here a distinction must be made between **Second Language Learning (L2)** and **Foreign Language Learning (FL)** as the results from the data collected in this study would most probably have been different were the students in question taking up Spanish as a second language. While L2 contexts typically involve immersion in native-speaking environments, FL contexts occur in non-native-speaking countries, where exposure to language is limited (Khouya, 2018), that is, the key difference between second language (L2) learning and foreign language (FL) learning lies in the context and environment where the language is acquired. Second language learning occurs where the language is spoken and used in daily life, while foreign language learning takes place in a setting where the language is not commonly used or spoken.

Research shows that environments tend to be more effective for language acquisition due to greater exposure and interaction (Spada, Brecht et al., Lennon). The article "*The Use of the Past Tense Aspect in Spanish by At-Home and Study-Abroad Chinese Learners*" by Yuliang Sun, Lourdes Díaz, and Mariona Taulé, published in 2020, examines how **learning environment** affects the acquisition of pretérito indefinido vs. imperfecto. They found that even though at-home learners perform better in discourse-level tasks, study-abroad learners show better lexical-level aspect use; in other words, they compared learners who studied Spanish in their home country (China) with those who studied abroad in a Spanish-speaking environment, aiming to understand how learning context affects grammatical development. They found that study-abroad learners showed significantly higher accuracy in selecting the appropriate past tense forms compared to at-home learners. In other words, the Study-abroad learners showed greater accuracy and more nuanced use of past tense forms. They concluded that:

- Immersion in a Spanish-speaking environment significantly enhances learners' ability to use tense-aspect distinctions appropriately.
- The findings support the idea that input quantity and quality—especially exposure to authentic discourse—play a crucial role in second language acquisition.
- The study contributes to understanding how learning context affects the development of complex grammatical features like aspect.

During the 1970s, scholarly attention in SLA was primarily directed toward topics like the acquisition of morphemes, the sequence in which language elements are learned, Selinker's (1972) concepts of "**interlanguage**" and "**fossilization**," and Corder's (1967) notion of the "**significance of learners' errors**." Much of the research during this period challenged Skinner's behaviorist framework. Corder made a distinction between **systematic and non-systematic errors** and emphasized the importance of addressing learners' individual needs.

Several SLA theories underpin various language teaching methodologies, including **behaviorism**, **interactionism**, **sociocultural theory**, and **the comprehension-based approach**. As Johnson (2004) explained, "behaviorism undermined the role of mental processes and viewed learning as the ability to inductively discover patterns of rule-governed behavior from the examples provided to the learner by his or her environment" (p. 18). From this standpoint, learning is seen as the result of habit formation through repetitive practice and drills. However, the limitations of behaviorism led many researchers to adopt Bruner's constructivist perspective, which sees learning as a process where individuals actively construct knowledge based on their prior experiences and understanding.

Interactionism posits that language development occurs through communicative exchanges among learners. Hatch (1978) noted that "one learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed" (p. 404). **The sociocultural approach**, grounded in Vygotsky's psychological theories, views language learning as a socially mediated process shaped by cultural and communicative experiences. In contrast, **the comprehension-based model** emphasizes internal cognitive mechanisms. Krashen (2004) asserted that the comprehension hypothesis involves "subconscious acquisition, not conscious learning," and that "the result of providing acquirers with comprehensible input is the emergence of grammatical structure in a predictable order." He also warned that "a strong affective filter (e.g. high anxiety) will prevent input from reaching those parts of the brain that do language acquisition" (p. 1).

So, because it was thought that the structures from one language to another were copied, the influence or interference of the mother tongue on the new language as a source of errors began to be investigated. That is how the **Contrastive Analysis** theory (CA) came into conception, which pretended to describe formally the mother tongue and the foreign language, contrasting them to establish the different structures between each one and so predict the errors that may appear in the learning process. This process has been

referred to as “**negative transfer**” or “**interference**” by a number of researchers (James, 1980; Nobel, 1982; Swan & Smith, 1987; Brown, 2001; Parker and Riley, 1994; Horwitz, 2008). However, new studies in the 70’s showed that not all the errors catalogued as possible by the Contrastive Analysis were produced and that many of the errors made could not be explained as influenced from the mother tongue. This was the break-point for **Error Analysis** (EA) to appear.

This paper therefore examines samples of learner language to determine the types of tenses and aspect **errors/mistakes**¹ that Chinese learners of Spanish make and discusses what these errors can tell us about the learners’ knowledge of the language and their ability to use that knowledge. This information has practical pedagogical value, about which Parker and Riley (1994) commented that “the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition cannot be ignored” (p. 225), and Fillmore and Snow (2000) noted that “understanding the variety of structures that different languages and dialects use to show meaning, including grammatical meaning such as verb tenses and aspect, can help teachers see the errors of their students who are learning a second or foreign language” (p. 16).

The objectives of the study are to categorize the errors by different types and to identify the problems the subjects face and to determine the level of influence the mother tongue has on the tense choice of the subjects. As such, the study proposes to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent do verb tense errors present evidence of students’ misinterpretations of the verbal systems in Spanish?
2. To what extent do students’ errors in verb tenses reflect or confirm the complexity of time and aspect in Spanish?

2. Theoretical Overview of the Main Concepts

This study uses **Error Analysis** henceforth not **Contrastive Analysis** as a theory to predict and explain learners’ mistakes or errors because researchers have found that not all errors predicted by the **CAH** are actually made. Furthermore, many of the errors, which learners make, are not predictable on the basis of the CAH. Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams (2003) state that adult beginners use simple structures in the target language either because of **simplification** or **overgeneralization**, such as, **durmiste** or **juegaron** instead of *dormiste* (*did you sleep/you slept*) and *jugaron* (*did they play/they played*), just as children do in their native language. Thus, such sentences are more similar to a child’s first language (L1) production than a translation from another language. Lightbown and Spada (1999: 75) have referred to these error types, which are common to both learners, as “**developmental errors**” and sustain that indeed some of these errors are shared by many learners across the world regardless of their L1 backgrounds.

A common challenge for learners is interference from their first language (L1). As Dulay and Burt (1976, p. 71) defined, “**interference**” is “the automatic transfer, due to habit of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language” (cited in Lott, 1983, p. 257). This phenomenon typically occurs when learners are using a second language. According to Weinreich (2011), L1 interference can manifest in three forms: *phonological, grammatical, and lexical*. In this study we will focus on the grammatical forms (**tenses and aspect**). These influences can either support or hinder the acquisition of the new language, and such effects are observable in both L2 and FL environments.

In FL contexts, where learners often share the same native language, teachers may find it easier to leverage positive aspects of L1 interference to support second language development. Lado (1957) introduced the concept of **contrastive analysis**, which examines the linguistic challenges that arise from differences between a learner’s first and second languages. While this approach may not account for every difficulty encountered, it can help educators address certain learning obstacles. EA, therefore, assumes that like child language, the language of adult second language learner is a system in its own right; that is, it is one which is rule-governed and predictable. Selinker (1972) used the term “**interlanguage**” to refer to learners’ developing second language knowledge. Nemser (1971) referred to the same general phenomenon in second language learning but stressed the successive approximation to the target language in his term **approximative system**. Corder (1971) used the term **idiosyncratic dialect** to connote the idea that the learner’s language rule is unique to a particular individual alone.

¹According to Corder, non-systematic errors are –mistakes that occur in learners’ native language, which might not affect language learning. On the other hand, errors are systematic, and they occur in second language learning. Language learners make mistakes when they fail to perform their competence, but they make errors when they do not know the correct rule.

Another concept in EA is **intraference**, which refers to “the confusion a language learner experiences when confronting conflicting patterns within the structures of a newly acquired language, irrespective of how the target language patterns might contrast with the learner’s mother tongue” (Scovel 2001: 51). It is *intraference* more than interference that leads L2 learners to take a guess about what could be grammatically acceptable in their new language. These inferences are not always correct, but they are an indicator of the learners’ creativity in the Second or Foreign Language Acquisition process and show furthermore, that they are not just responding from the habits they acquired while picking up their L1s, as the behaviorists would claim. As defined by Corder (1967) errors are a way the learner has of testing his hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning.

From a behaviorist’s perspective, “interference is based on old habits whereas intraference is based on new habits” (Scovel 2001: 53). Like children who acquire their L1 by creating new words and new rules, adult learners create new L2 or FL constructions increasing in degrees of complexity from their overgeneralizations of what they have acquired in the target language. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, cited in Scovel 2001: 54) coined the term “**creative construction**” to describe this innovative view of learner’s errors. After the **Creative Construction Hypothesis**, several influential and more recent theories have emerged which tried to explain the types of errors learners make when learning a second language; one of those theories, the **Noticing Hypothesis**, introduced by Richard Schmidt in 1990, is a seminal concept in the field of Second Language Acquisition (**SLA**). It asserts that conscious awareness of linguistic features in input—what Schmidt termed “noticing”—is a necessary condition for learning. In other words, learners must consciously register specific language forms in order for those forms to become part of their interlanguage system.

According to Schmidt, only input that is noticed becomes intake, and thus contributes to language development. This challenges earlier views that exposure alone could lead to acquisition, emphasizing instead the role of attention and awareness in processing linguistic information. Schmidt’s hypothesis was grounded in his own longitudinal case study of an adult learner of Portuguese, where he observed that language features not noticed by the learner were not acquired, despite frequent exposure. This led him to conclude that subliminal learning is insufficient for adult second language acquisition and that errors persist when learners fail to notice the correct forms in the input.

The **Interaction Hypothesis**, as revised by Michael Long in 1996, is a foundational theory in the field of Second Language Acquisition (**SLA**). It posits that face-to-face interaction, particularly when it involves negotiation of meaning, plays a crucial role in facilitating language learning. This hypothesis builds upon earlier work by Long (1981, 1983) and draws from discourse analysis research of the 1970s, including studies by Wagner-Gough and Hatch (1975) and Hatch (1978). The hypothesis is grounded in the idea that input alone is insufficient for optimal language acquisition. Instead, interactional modifications during communicative exchanges are what make input comprehensible and developmentally useful. Long’s framework integrates insights from **Krashen’s Input Hypothesis** and **Swain’s Output Hypothesis**, positioning interaction as a bridge between input and output. In this theory, errors are accounted for as opportunities for feedback and negotiation, which help learners notice gaps in their knowledge.

The **Processability Theory (PT)**, developed by Manfred Pienemann (1998), offers a psycholinguistically grounded model for explaining and predicting the developmental stages of second language acquisition (SLA). Rooted in Levelt’s (1989) model of speech production, PT posits that learners can only produce linguistic forms when their cognitive processing capacity can handle them. This theory has become a cornerstone in SLA research, particularly in morphosyntactic development, and has been empirically validated across multiple languages. The theory is operationalized using **Lexical-Functional Grammar**, which allows for a formal representation of syntactic structures and their mapping to functional categories. This formalization enables PT to make precise predictions about the stages of language development across different languages.

At the core of PT is a hierarchy of **processing procedures**, each building on the previous one. These procedures reflect the increasing complexity of grammatical operations that the learner’s interlanguage system can handle. PT predicts that learners will follow a **universal developmental path** in acquiring grammatical structures. This path is not easily altered by instruction, a claim formalized in the **Teachability Hypothesis** (Pienemann, 1984), which states that instruction is only effective if it targets structures that the learner is developmentally ready to acquire. Since its original formulation, PT has been extended to include: **Lexical Mapping Theory (LMT)**: to account for argument structure and word order. PT has also informed **language assessment, curriculum design, and task-based language teaching**, offering a developmental framework for sequencing instructional content.

James P. Lantolf's application of **Sociocultural Theory (SCT)** to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) began gaining scholarly attention with the publication of the edited volume: "**Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning**" (2000), published by Oxford University Press. Sociocultural Theory (SCT), rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky, offers a dynamic framework for understanding second language acquisition (SLA) as a socially mediated process; that is, its **Core idea** is that Language learning is mediated through social interaction and cultural tools: in other words, this work marked a foundational moment in integrating Vygotskian principles—such as **mediation, internalization, and the Zone of Proximal Development**—into SLA research. In this theory, errors may reflect the learner's current zone of proximal development (ZPD), where they are experimenting with new forms through interaction. SCT also incorporates **Activity Theory**, which examines how learners' motives, goals, and the sociocultural context shape their engagement with language tasks. This perspective shifts the focus from isolated linguistic input to the broader **sociocultural activity systems** in which learning occurs. Lantolf later expanded on these ideas with Steven Thorne in their 2007 work, further solidifying SCT's role in the field.

The **Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST)**, as introduced by Diane Larsen-Freeman and Lynne Cameron (2008), represents a significant departure from traditional, linear models of second language acquisition (SLA). Drawing on principles from complexity science and dynamic systems theory, CDST conceptualizes language development as a nonlinear, emergent, and context-sensitive process shaped by the continuous interaction of multiple variables across time and scale. CDST has inspired longitudinal and micro-genetic studies that capture the fluidity and complexity of language development. CDST offers a robust framework for understanding SLA as a dynamic, individualized, and contextually embedded process. It challenges educators and researchers to embrace complexity, variability, and change as central to the nature of language learning as it sees errors are part of the fluctuating patterns of development, not necessarily signs of regression or failure.

3. Methodology

This study examines the language of a group of Malaysian Chinese students studying Spanish as part of their Degree requirements. The students who participated in the study are all local female Chinese students with ages ranging from 20 to 22 years old who were, at that time (2006), taking their second semester in Spanish language. The fact that only one group was analyzed and that this group has a few students, may be seen as a limitation in the design. Therefore, this is mainly a case study that was conducted during their Spanish III course to determine the type of verb tense and aspect errors that were most frequently made by these Chinese students of Spanish as a foreign language.

These students have to take 6 levels of Spanish in one and a half years; that is to say, 2 levels of Spanish in one semester (14 weeks) with an intensity of 16 hours a week. By the time the data was collected they had already completed level 3 (336 hours of direct instruction/contact hours). The data comprises a midterm test the students sat for. It was composed of a reading passage, followed by open-ended comprehension questions, a gap filling activity, a text completion, sentence construction and a composition-writing task. As the teacher's ability to design exams was not the issue here, a closer look at whether any of the errors presented by these students were the result of any misunderstanding or misinterpretation in these examinations' directions or layout (exam design bias) was not verified, which might have led to another limitation in this study.

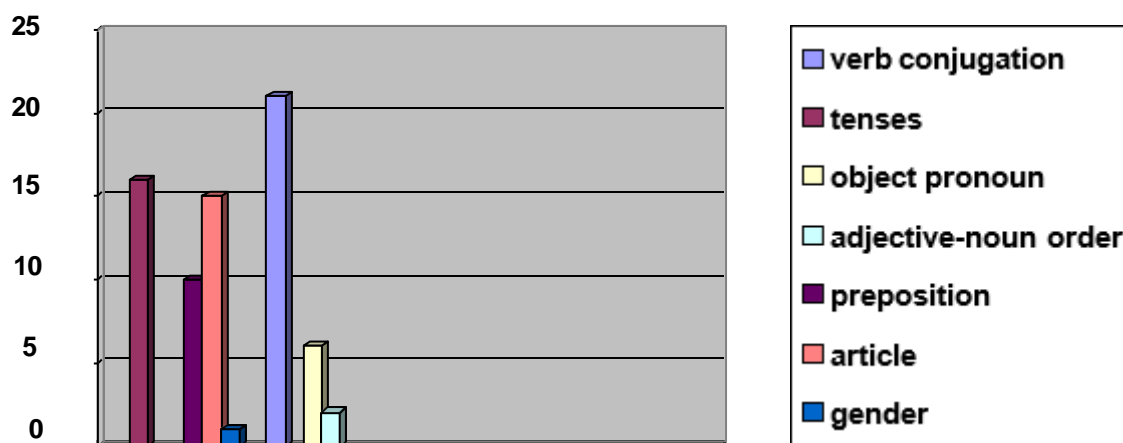
3.1 Data analysis and findings

First, all the errors were classified according to the different grammatical functions they serve. It is important to note, however, that only those syntactical errors that were directly related to verb tenses and aspect were analyzed; some other categories like **article omission, preposition addition, complement of time and placement (ordering)** and so on, though presented in the graph, were not discussed. When analyzing the information gathered in the test, this is what was found in relation to verb tenses and aspect; here are some of the most significant examples:

The words in bold show when the verb conjugation error occurred and the words in parenthesis show the correct conjugation for each one of the sentences. The words in parenthesis show that the co-pretérito (Pretérito Imperfecto) for sentences 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 should have been used, as well as for the first clause in sentences 1, 5 and 9 and the Ante-copretérito (Pretérito Pluscuamperfecto) for sentence 10 as well as for the second clause in sentences 1 and 5 and the Pretérito (Pretérito Indefinido) for sentence 11 and for the second clause in sentence 9.

- 1- “**Está** (*estaba*) enfadado con las ranas que le **faltaron** (*habían faltado*) al respeto”.
- 2- “cuando mi padre era joven, él **estaba jugando** (*jugaba*) futbol en su universidad”
- 3- “Cuando yo era pequeña, **estaba viviendo** (*vivía*) en Klang”
- 4- “Él le dijo que había comprado un coche nuevo y que ahora **está** (*estaba*) **trabajando**”.
- 5- “Misan me dijo que le **duele** (*dolía*) el estómago porque **comió** (*había comido*) **mucho**”
- 6- “Cuando mi hermano era bebe **estaba llorando** (*lloraba*) todos los días”
- 7- “Mientras **esperamos** (*esperábamos*) a Luisa, **estaba leyendo** (*leíamos*) la noticia”
- 8- “Nosotras **estuvimos** (*estábamos*) estudiando cuando empezó la película”
- 9- “Tu **estuviste** (*estabas*) durmiendo cuando te **llamo** (*llamé*)”
- 10- “Que sus padres ***viaja*** (*habían viajado*) en las vacaciones pasadas”
- 11- “No, porque Júpiter **estuvo** (*estaba*) enojado con las ranas”

All these deviances in tenses may be explained by the fact that Chinese and Malay languages express the concept of time very differently from Spanish and English. “They do not conjugate the verb to express time relations; therefore, Chinese and Malay learners have serious difficulties in handling Spanish tenses and aspects” (Swan and Smith 1987: 228); figure 1 shows this percentage in a diagram.



It can clearly be seen that after the category of verb conjugation, the category that ranks first in this test, is **tenses**, which outnumbers the other categories (**gender, article, preposition, object pronoun, adjective-noun order**), with a total of 16 wrongly-conjugated tenses. After having completed 1½ semesters (about 21 weeks of direct instruction) it can be concluded that these learners have not understood the correct usage of tenses and aspect in Spanish. The reason may be because the modern Spanish verb system has sixteen distinct complete paradigms (i.e. sets of forms for each combination of tense and mood, plus one incomplete paradigm (the imperative), as well as three *non-temporal forms* (infinitive, gerund, and past participle); that is, Spanish verb conjugation is divided into four categories known as **moods**: indicative, subjunctive, imperative and the traditionally so-called infinite mood (newer grammars in Spanish call it *formas no personales* “non-personal forms”).

Two recent studies are in alignment with the findings and results found in my research and reveal that students often rely on instinctual patterns from their first language, which fail to account for the grammatical nuances of Spanish. The first article “*Basic Spanish for Malaysian Students: Learning Difficulties*” a 2022 study by Nor Shahila Mansor et al. investigates the challenges Malaysian students face when learning Spanish as a foreign language, focusing on learners enrolled in the Basic Spanish Language course at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), the study identifies grammar—especially **verb conjugation**— as a major challenge for Malaysian students learning Spanish. She found that the most significant difficulty faced by Malaysian students learning Spanish is grammar, particularly **verb conjugation**. This includes mastering different tenses and irregular verb forms.

The second study titled “*Subject-Verb Agreement Poses Problem in the Usage of Spanish Language among Universiti Sains Malaysia Undergraduates*” published in 2023, investigates the persistent challenges faced by Malaysian undergraduates at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in mastering

subject-verb agreement (SVA) in Spanish as a foreign language. Drawing on **comparative linguistic analysis**, the research identifies native language interference—particularly from Malay, Chinese, and English—as a primary factor contributing to errors in Spanish verb conjugation. Through a descriptive essay task administered to 84 students, the study found that 47% of participants exhibited consistent issues with verb conjugation, including incorrect tense usage.

Both studies underscore the need for pedagogical strategies that emphasize contextualized grammar instruction, and the minimization of **cross-linguistic interference**, as well as some pedagogical adjustments, such as: more interactive and contextual grammar teaching. These studies contribute to the broader discourse on foreign language acquisition in multilingual contexts and offer practical implications for curriculum design (the need for curriculum support tailored to Malaysian learners, considering their linguistic background and learning styles) and instructional methodology in Spanish language education.

It is important to remember that in Malaysia the three main races are: Malays, Chinese and Indians and these two studies are relevant because even though neither of the studies specifies the number of students per race, most probably there were Chinese students involved in the studies; besides, it is to remember that Malay (Bahasa Melayu) is the national and official language and both Malaysian Chinese and Indians acquire it as their first language. So, the lack of inflection of the Malay language in verb conjugation and tenses is another factor to consider here, not only the Chinese language. Malay and Mandarin Chinese languages express **tense and aspect**² quite differently from languages like English, French, Italian or Spanish. Instead of verb conjugation, Malay and Mandarin Chinese use **time adverbs** and **aspectual markers** to indicate when an action takes place and whether it is completed, ongoing, or habitual.

Chou and Wu (2007) stated: “tense locates an event or situation in time with respect to the moment of speaking (speech time) or a reference point (reference time); aspect manifests the temporal constituency (the internal temporal status) of a situation (p.32)”. In most recent approaches many scholars agree that

²In linguistics, tense refers to the grammaticalized expression of time in a language, typically indicating the temporal location of an event or state relative to the moment of speaking. Aspect, on the other hand, conveys how an event or action unfolds over time, focusing not on *when* the event occurs, but on *how* it occurs—whether it is completed, ongoing, habitual, or repetitive; in other words, aspect refers to a grammatical category that expresses how a verbal action, event, or state extends over time, describing its internal temporal properties rather than its timing relative to the present moment (which is the function of tense). It provides a perspective on the duration, completion, or repetition of an action or event.

in English there are two tenses: **the present tense and the past tense**. Aspect further describes *continuation, duration, repetition, and completion* of events. For example: *simple past tense, past perfect tense and past progressive tense* manifest a distinction in aspect. Other scholars treat tense and aspect as an integrated whole. Based on this perspective, English consists of twelve verb tenses. However, the progressive tenses in grammar treatises are not usually considered as a special tense but just one of the **periphrastic** verbal constructions³. According to this, English has only 9 tenses; whereas Spanish 16 (10 for the indicative mood and 6 for the subjunctive); almost twice as many.

Malay relies on **particles and context** rather than verb inflection. This makes the grammar relatively simple but highly dependent on word order and auxiliary markers. Malay language uses temporal adverbs and other time-indicating words, rather than verb conjugations, to express tense and aspect. Aspectual markers, like **sudah** (already) for past actions or **sedang** (currently) for progressive actions, play a significant role in indicating time. (Swan and Smith 1987). Here's a more detailed explanation:

Tense in Malay

Malay generally does not inflect verbs for tense. Tense is primarily indicated through the use of time-specific adverbs (e.g., **semalam** - yesterday, **esok** - tomorrow) or auxiliary words like **sudah** (already) or **akan** (will). In other words, Malay verbs do **not change form** to indicate tense. Instead, **temporal adverbs** or **context** are used:

Example: Saya sudah makan (I already ate) vs. Saya makan (I eat/will eat).

- **Past:**
 - *sudah* (already)
→ *Saya sudah makan.* = I have eaten.
 - *telah* (has/have) – more formal
→ *Dia telah pergi.* = He/she has gone.
- **Present:**
 - *sedang* (currently)
→ *Saya sedang belajar.* = I am studying.
- **Future:**
 - *akan* (will)
→ *Kami akan datang.* = We will come.

Aspect in Malay

Malay relies heavily on aspectual markers to convey the nature of an action (e.g., completed, ongoing, habitual); that is, Aspect is shown using **auxiliary words** that describe the state of the action. Examples of aspectual markers include: **Sudah:** indicates a completed action. **Sedang:** indicates an ongoing action. **Akan:** indicates a future action. **Baru:** indicates a recent action. The verb itself generally remains unchanged regardless of the tense or aspect.

- **Perfective (completed):**
 - *sudah, telah*
→ *Mereka sudah tiba.* = They have arrived.
- **Imperfective (ongoing):**
 - *sedang*
→ *Dia sedang tidur.* = He/she is sleeping.
- **Habitual:**
 - Often implied by context or time expressions like *setiap hari* (every day)
→ *Saya pergi kerja setiap hari.* = I go to work every day.

³In linguistics, **periphrasis** is a device by which grammatical meaning is expressed by one or more free morphemes - typically one or more function words accompanying a content word - instead of by inflectional affixes or derivation.

- **Inchoative (beginning to do something):**
 - *mula* (to begin)
→ *Dia mula menangis.* = He/she started crying

Example: The verb *beli* (to buy) can be used in different time contexts without changing its form, with the tense and aspect being indicated by other words:

Saya sudah membeli buku (I have already bought the book) - completed action.
 Saya sedang membeli buku (I am buying the book) - ongoing action.
 Saya akan membeli buku (I will buy the book) - future action.
 Saya baru membeli buku (I just bought the book) - recent action.

In summary, Malay uses a system of temporal adverbs and aspectual markers to convey tense and aspect, rather than relying on verb conjugations as seen in many other languages. In Malay, tenses are understood from the context. The same form of verb can be used for the present, past, future and even the continuous tense. When the sentence is ambiguous, appropriate words or phrases (*aspectual auxiliaries*) or adverbs of time are used. Examples of such words are: *akan* (will, shall), which indicates future; *sedang/sekarang* (now), which indicate continuous tense; *sudah* (already), which indicates past tense and *telah*, which indicates perfect tense (Sulaiman 2000; Lewis 1968).

Many languages have explicit grammatical markers for aspect, such as auxiliary verbs and verb endings in English (e.g., "was walking" for progressive, "has eaten" for perfect) or particles in languages like Mandarin Chinese (e.g., 了 "le" for completion, 在 "zai" for ongoing action). Let us see how these two grammatical categories differ in Spanish and Chinese Mandarin:

- **Verb Conjugation:**
Spanish verbs change form according to tense, mood, person, and number (e.g., "yo hablo", "él habló", "ellos hablarán").
Chinese verbs are invariable and do not conjugate.
- **Time and Aspect Markers:**
In Spanish, tense is explicit in the verb form.
In Chinese, time is indicated mainly by time-related words or phrases (e.g., "yesterday", "tomorrow") and aspect by particles (e.g., 了 indicates completed action).
- **Aspect:**
 - **Spanish:** Aspect is expressed through verb forms like the pretérito (completed action) and the imperfecto (ongoing action).
 - **Chinese:** Aspect is marked with particles like 了 (le) for perfective (completed action), and 在 (zài) or 着 (zhe) for imperfective (ongoing action).

Examples:

"Yo comí" (past, perfective).

"Yo estaba comiendo" (past, imperfective).

"Yo comeré" (future).

我吃了 (wǒ chī le) - "I ate" (completed action, 了 indicates perfective).

我在吃饭 (wǒ zài chī fàn) - "I am eating" (ongoing action, 在 indicates imperfective).

我明天吃 (wǒ míngtiān chī) - "I will eat tomorrow" (future, time indicated by "tomorrow").

A detailed comparison between verbs in Spanish and Mandarin Chinese, focusing on **tense** and **aspect**, two fundamental categories in verbal grammar can be found in the appendix. This comparison is especially useful for teachers of Spanish as a foreign language and for students whose native languages are not inflectional.

The paper titled: *Comparison of the Usage of Spanish Verbs and Chinese Verbs* presented at the 3rd

International Conference on Language and Cultural Communication (ICLCC 2025), analyzes the grammatical structures of Spanish and Chinese verbs. While it doesn't focus on Malaysian Chinese students specifically, it offers valuable insights into the contrastive grammar that could influence learners from Chinese-speaking backgrounds when learning Spanish.

The study conducted a comparative analysis of Spanish and Chinese verbs, focusing on tense particles and grammatical cases. It found that Spanish verbs are highly inflected, with tense, mood, and aspect encoded morphologically. Chinese verbs, in contrast, rely more on particles and word order to express temporal and aspectual distinctions. Learners of either language face challenges when transferring verb usage rules due to these structural differences. The research concludes that the fundamental differences in verb systems between Spanish and Chinese can lead to misunderstandings and errors in second language acquisition. It emphasizes the importance of **contrastive linguistic analysis** in understanding how learners process and produce verb forms in both languages.

Other recent studies that give account of the grammatical gap between Spanish and Chinese in relation to **tense** and **aspect** and that confirm how Chinese learners of Spanish struggle to master these grammatical elements in this language are, for example: the book titled: "*Los tiempos verbales del español: descripción del sistema y su adquisición en segundas lenguas*" by Llorenç Comajoan-Colomé and Manuel Pérez Saldanya (2018), which offers a comprehensive and pedagogically oriented analysis of Spanish verbal system, including tense, aspect and modality, especially in the context of second language acquisition, with comparisons between Spanish, English, Romanian, Amazigh, and Chinese. It also addresses the acquisition of these concepts in Spanish as a second language.

The book begins by clarifying the multiple meanings of the word **tiempo** (tense) in Spanish - chronological, atmospheric, and grammatical - before focusing on grammatical tense. It presents a systematic description of the Spanish verbal system, including morphological, semantic, and pragmatic aspects. The authors emphasize the complexity of tense and aspect in Spanish, especially for learners whose native languages do not mark these distinctions similarly. It provides empirical insights into how second-language learners acquire and use Spanish verb tenses, highlighting common errors and developmental patterns. The authors conclude by saying that the acquisition of tense and aspect is gradual and influenced by the learner's first language, instructional context, and exposure and they advocate for a functional and communicative approach to teaching verb tenses, rather than purely formal or rule-based methods.

The master thesis "*La enseñanza de los tiempos verbales del español a los estudiantes chinos*" de Liu Jia investigates the challenges faced by Chinese learners of Spanish in mastering verb tenses, using a corpus-based approach. Drawing on the CEES (Corpus de Español como Lengua Extranjera para Estudiantes Chinos), the research identifies common errors, explores their linguistic roots, and proposes pedagogical strategies to improve instruction. The author found that errors are often systematic and stem from **interlingual interference**—notably, the absence of verb conjugation in Mandarin Chinese, as learners struggle particularly with the Pretérito vs. Imperfecto distinction, compound tenses, and future tense usage. The CEES corpus revealed that over 60% of tense-related errors involved past tenses. They concluded that the acquisition of Spanish verb tenses by Chinese learners is not merely a **lexical issue**, but a **deep grammatical and cognitive challenge** and that the mismatch between **analytic (Chinese)** and **synthetic (Spanish)** language structures requires targeted pedagogical intervention.

If the lack of tenses of the languages these students speak (Malay and Chinese) is the reason for their inability to master the verb-tenses and Aspect in Spanish, then Spanish learners of English should not have any problems with verb tenses in the **Target Language** (TL); however, this has been found not to be the case because in one study conducted by Bhela (1999), in which she analyzed four participants whose mother tongues were: Cambodian, Vietnamese, Italian and Spanish, she discovered that while none made errors in tenses (*present, past and past continuous tense*) in their respective first languages, all of them made errors in these tenses in English; though all of them were bilingual. In the case of the Cambodian and Vietnamese languages the errors may be predicted on the basis that though these structures are present, their use is limited, but in the case of Spanish and Italian where the structures are similar and highly used; the errors cannot be predicted on the basis of interference.

The reason for which Chinese and Malay speaking students tend to have difficulties in understanding and applying tenses and aspects in Spanish, or for which Spanish Speaking students have the same troubles in tenses in English may lie in the **Intraference** phenomenon, which is, according to Scovel (2001), the confusion a language learner experiences when confronting conflicting patterns within the structures of

a newly acquired language, irrespective of how the target language patterns might contrast with the learner's mother tongue.

The first question that this study proposed to address was:

- To what extent do verb tense errors present evidence of students' misinterpretations of the Spanish verbal systems?

It can be observed, that students not only tend to carry over the changes a verb suffers to all the pronouns in one tense but also the change of certain verbs from one tense into another where it does not necessarily apply. The analysis indicated that, there is a misunderstanding or confusion of the syntactic rules of the Spanish tenses and aspect; in other words, these students are not applying the rules accurately and properly. Thus, students' errors are a direct reflection of their misinterpretations of the verbal system because of the complexity of suffixation that Spanish verbs present. Chinese-speaking students tend to omit or misuse Spanish verb inflections, as these do not exist in their native language. The use of aspectual particles in Chinese has no direct equivalent in Spanish, which can lead to errors such as:

"Yo comer ya" instead of **"Ya he comido."**

In the Study: *A Corpus Analysis of Temporal Adverbs and Verb Tenses in Spanish, English, and Chinese* (Cheng & Lu, 2022), the authors used a Contrastive analysis of **temporal adverb-tense co-occurrence** across languages. They discovered that Chinese learners rely more on **temporal adverbs** due to lack of tense morphology. The analysis revealed **language-specific patterns** in how temporal adverbs align with verb tenses. They concluded that Spanish learners from Chinese backgrounds may struggle with **tense-aspect alignment** due to structural differences.

The article *"Universals and Transfer in the Acquisition of the Progressive Aspect"* by Zeng, Shirai, and Chen (2019), although focused on English, includes L1 Chinese and Spanish learners and supports the **Aspect Hypothesis**, showing how L1 influences the acquisition of progressive forms. The study investigates how learners of English from different first language (L1) backgrounds—**Chinese, German, and Spanish**—acquire the **progressive aspect** (e.g., "is running") in English. The research is anchored in the **Aspect Hypothesis** (Andersen & Shirai, 1994), which posits that learners initially associate grammatical aspect markers with prototypical verb types—specifically, the progressive aspect with **activity verbs** (e.g., "run", "swim"). The study also draws on **transfer theory**, examining how L1 aspectual systems influence L2 acquisition. They found that **Chinese learners** (whose L1 lacks a grammatical progressive) overused the progressive with **stative verbs**, possibly due to misinterpretation of English aspectual distinctions. They concluded that while the Aspect Hypothesis is supported across L1 groups, the influence of learners' native aspectual systems significantly shapes the trajectory and accuracy of progressive aspect acquisition.

The second question was:

- To what extent do students' errors in verb tenses reflect or confirm the complexity of tense and aspect of Spanish verbs?

Spanish has a system of tenses much more inflected and complex than Chinese, English and Malay because Spanish is a relatively **synthetic language**⁴ with a moderate-to-high degree of inflection, which shows up mostly in Spanish verb conjugations with over fifty conjugated forms per verb. In other words, whereas Spanish is a **fusional language**, with changes in word form to indicate grammatical categories, Chinese is an **isolating language**, with minimal inflection and a simpler structure. In short, **Chinese focuses more on the aspect of the action** (whether it is completed or ongoing), while **Spanish emphasizes verbal tense** (past, present, future).

As we have seen before, Mandarin has no suffixes at all for the present tense and no tenses whatsoever. Instead, Chinese verbs can have suffixes (*aspectual particles*) such as: "guò" (过) or "le" (了) that expresses perfective. Another way of expressing the past is to use adverbs such as "yesterday." For example: "zuótiān wǒ chī jī" (昨天我吃鸡, yesterday I eat chicken). It can also make use of adverbs of frequency like "I-Jin

⁴A language with a high morpheme-per-word ratio, as opposed to a low morpheme-per-word ratio in what is described as an **isolating language**.

(already). Past tense in Chinese can also be emphasized by surrounding the verb and direct object with the words "shì"- "de" (是-的). For example: "wǒ shì zuótiān chī jī de" (我是昨天吃鸡的). To express future tense, Chinese uses temporal adverbials such as: "Hsia Li Pai" (next week).

Chapter 4 titled: *Aspectual Confusion in L2 Chinese Learners* of the book: *A Reference Grammar for Teaching Chinese: Syntax and Discourse*, and which focuses on **Aspect**, discusses how English-speaking learners of Chinese often confuse tense and aspect, mistakenly applying tense-based logic to a language that relies on aspectual markers like 了 (le), 着 (zhe), and 过 (guo). While the study focuses on English, the findings are highly relevant for Spanish speakers too, as both Spanish and English are **tense-prominent languages**, unlike Chinese. Through empirical studies involving comprehension and production tasks, the chapter reveals that L2 learners often exhibit confusion in selecting appropriate aspectual forms, especially in contexts requiring subtle temporal or habitual distinctions. The authors found that the degree of confusion in **L1 Transfer** correlates with the typological distance between Chinese and the learners' first languages. Learners from **non-aspect-prominent languages** (e.g., English) show greater difficulty than those from **aspect-sensitive languages**. The findings suggest that this confusion stems not only from structural differences between Chinese and learners' native languages but also from limited exposure to authentic usage patterns.

In the article: *A Story-Writing Based Study on the Acquisition of Aspect in Spanish by Mandarin Chinese Learners* (Sun, Díaz, Taulé, 2020) and which uses LAH and DH with a focus on **L1 semantic transfer** as the frameworks used, the researchers found that L1 Mandarin influences Spanish aspect acquisition at the **semantic level**, not morphosyntactic, as Learners rely on **temporal adverbs** due to the lack of tense morphology in Chinese. In other words, the paper investigates how native Mandarin Chinese learners acquire the aspectual system of Spanish, particularly the use of pretérito indefinido (simple past) and pretérito Imperfecto (imperfect past), which are notoriously difficult for learners whose native language lacks grammatical aspect. The study highlights developmental patterns and persistent difficulties in acquiring aspectual distinctions in Spanish.

The study concludes that while both the LAH and DH offer valuable insights into the acquisition of aspect, their predictive power is moderated by L1 influence and learner proficiency. The findings underscore the importance of considering both **lexical semantics** and **discourse structure** in L2 aspect acquisition research. Moreover, the nuanced role of **semantic transfer** from Mandarin Chinese highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that explicitly address cross-linguistic differences in aspectual systems.

4. Discussion

The results of this study confirm that the difficulties Malaysian Chinese students face in mastering Spanish verb tenses and aspect cannot be explained solely by the lack of verbal inflection in their native languages (Mandarin Chinese and Malay). Instead, they are the result of a more complex phenomenon in which multiple factors interact. First, **intraference** emerges as the main source of errors, since learners do not simply transfer structures from their L1 but rather generate their own hypotheses about how the Spanish verbal system works. This finding aligns with Corder (1967) and Scovel (2001), who argue that errors should be viewed as a creative stage in the development of interlanguage.

The findings also support those of Mansor et al. (2022) and Cheow (2023), who identified verb conjugation as one of the major challenges for Malaysian learners of Spanish. Comparisons with other studies (e.g., Sun, Díaz & Taulé, 2020) further highlight the role of learning context—whether at home or in a study-abroad environment—in determining the accuracy of tense-aspect use. In the Malaysian case, the lack of immersion limits students' exposure to authentic input and reduces opportunities to practice the contrast between *pretérito* and *imperfecto*.

Another crucial factor is the **complexity of the Spanish verbal system**, which is highly inflected, with more than fifty conjugated forms per verb. This stands in sharp contrast to the invariable morphology of Chinese and Malay verbs. Such typological distance requires learners not only to acquire new grammatical categories but also to reorganize their cognitive strategies for marking temporality and aspect, as emphasized by Comajoan-Colomé and Pérez Saldanya (2018).

Finally, the results underscore the need for **pedagogical approaches to verb tense instruction that are**

communicative and context-based, rather than focused on the rote memorization of paradigms. Following Schmidt's (1990) *Noticing Hypothesis*, learners must be guided to consciously notice tense and aspect forms in the input in order to successfully incorporate them into their interlanguage.

In sum, this discussion suggests that the acquisition of Spanish verb tenses by Malaysian Chinese learners should be understood as the result of the interaction between the morphological complexity of Spanish, typological distance between the languages, the conditions of input exposure, and the internal processes of interlanguage development.

5. Synopsis of the Main Research Outcomes

This case study investigates the grammatical challenges Malaysian Chinese students face when learning Spanish, focusing specifically on verb tense and aspect errors. Conducted during the students' third semester of a Spanish undergraduate program at the University of Malaya, the research uses Error Analysis to classify and interpret the types of mistakes made in written tasks.

The findings reveal that the primary source of difficulty is not interference from the students' native languages (Chinese or Malay), but rather *intraference*—confusion arising from the internal complexities of Spanish itself. The study highlights that Spanish's rich inflectional verb system, with 16 paradigms and multiple moods, poses significant challenges for learners whose native languages rely on aspectual markers and temporal adverbs instead of verb conjugation.

The article also explores how learning environments, input quality, and individual learner differences influence second language acquisition. It concludes with pedagogical recommendations, emphasizing the need for contextualized grammar instruction and strategies that address cross-linguistic differences.

6. Conclusions

One of the reasons why Spanish tenses and aspect seem to be quite difficult to speakers of other languages to grasp, is because in order to form tenses, Spanish does not use helping verbs or auxiliary verbs as tense indicators like English, Malay or Chinese; instead, in Spanish, it is the verb ending that changes in order to indicate the tense and the mood of the verb.

The learner's L1 seems to be an important determinant of SLA but, it is not the only one and may not be the most important. But it is almost impossible here to determine its precise contribution because it has to do, among other things, with the linguistic factors on the one hand and the learner's stage of development on the other.

Many learners in Foreign Language (FL) settings are still developing their **interlanguage**, a transitional linguistic system that differs from both their native and target languages. Progressing toward full proficiency requires considerable time and effort. This evolving system often results in frequent errors, and it is essential for language instructors to understand how to address them effectively.

Ultimately, the study calls for pedagogical strategies that are sensitive to the linguistic backgrounds of learners and that prioritize explicit, contextualized instruction in tense and aspect. It also advocates for increased exposure to authentic language input and the use of targeted feedback to address persistent grammatical errors. By doing so, educators can better support learners in navigating the intricate landscape of Spanish verb morphology and achieving greater linguistic competence.

7. Limitations, Implications, and Further Directions of Research

This study, while insightful, is constrained by several limitations. Firstly, the research is based on a single cohort of Malaysian Chinese students enrolled in a Spanish III course, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The sample size and demographic homogeneity restrict the ability to draw conclusions applicable to learners from other linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Secondly, the study relies solely on written production data from a midterm examination, without triangulating findings with oral performance, longitudinal tracking, or learner interviews. This may overlook nuances in learners' spoken language use and cognitive processing. Additionally, potential biases in exam design were not

assessed, which could have influenced the types and frequency of errors observed.

The findings underscore the pedagogical importance of addressing *intraference*—internal confusion within the target language—rather than focusing exclusively on L1 interference. This has significant implications for curriculum design and instructional methodology in foreign language contexts. Educators should prioritize explicit instruction in tense and aspect, especially in languages with rich inflectional systems like Spanish. That is why, it is essential to teach Spanish with an emphasis on the full verb form, including person, tense, and aspect, and to use communicative contexts to reinforce meaning.

An important aspect of this study is that it provides an interesting comparison of four languages, namely Malay, Mandarin-Chinese, Spanish and English. The combination of two Asian and two European languages is a move away from a previous research focus on mainly European languages and this is useful for the current local teaching context. Moreover, the study highlights the need for differentiated teaching strategies that consider learners' linguistic backgrounds, particularly when their native languages lack tense morphology. The results also support the integration of contrastive linguistic analysis and error-based feedback to enhance learners' grammatical awareness and accuracy.

Future research should expand the scope by including larger and more diverse samples across different educational institutions and linguistic backgrounds. Comparative studies involving learners from other L1 groups (e.g., Malay, Tamil, or English speakers) could provide deeper insights into cross-linguistic influences. Longitudinal designs tracking learners' development over time would offer a more dynamic understanding of how tense and aspect acquisition evolves. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods—such as learner interviews, think-aloud protocols, and classroom observations—could enrich the analysis of cognitive and affective factors influencing error production. Finally, experimental studies testing the effectiveness of targeted pedagogical interventions could validate instructional strategies aimed at mitigating *intraference* and improving tense-aspect mastery.

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APPENDIX

1. Differences in Verbal Tense

Feature	Spanish	Mandarin Chinese
Verbal Inflection	The verb changes according to tense, person, and number (<i>hablo, hablas, hablé</i>).	The verb is invariable (吃 <i>chī</i> = “to eat” in any tense).
Grammatical Tenses	Present, preterit, imperfect, pluperfect, future, conditional, etc.	No grammatical tenses. Time is inferred from context or marked with adverbs (昨天 <i>zuótiān</i> = “yesterday”).
Temporal Marking	Integrated into the verb form (<i>comía, comeré</i>).	Lexical: uses adverbs or temporal expressions (现在 <i>xiànzài</i> = “now”).

2. Differences in Verbal Aspect

Feature	Spanish	Mandarin Chinese
Grammatical Aspect	Expressed through verb forms: perfective (<i>comí</i>), imperfective (<i>comía</i>), progressive (<i>estoy comiendo</i>).	Expressed with post-verbal particles: 了 (<i>le</i>), 着 (<i>zhe</i>), 过 (<i>guo</i>).
Perfectivity	<i>Comí</i> (completed action).	吃了 <i>chī le</i> (completed action).
Progressivity	<i>Estoy comiendo</i> (ongoing action).	吃着 <i>chī zhe</i> (ongoing action).
Past Experience	<i>He comido</i> (experienced action).	吃过 <i>chī guo</i> (experience).
Combination of Tense and Aspect	Tense and aspect are fused in the verb form (<i>había comido</i>).	Tense and aspect are expressed separately: verb + particle + adverb.