

Use of Narrative Tenses by L1 and Spanish L2 English Speakers: Are There Any Implications Due to Language Contact?

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Abstract

In the present study the narratives produced by a group of L1 and L2 speakers of English will be examined. Our main aim will be to answer the following questions: - Is there any significant difference in the way L1 and L2 speakers of English build their narratives? - Is there a relationship between proficiency and transfer? This project will include a description of the data gathered, the method of elicitation, the profile of the participants, a description of the grammatical structure to be analysed and an analysis of the results after having been classified.

Keywords: Narrative Tenses, Language Contact, Transfer

Título: Uso de tiempos narrativos por hablantes nativos de inglés y hablantes de inglés como segunda lengua. ¿Hay alguna implicación debido al contacto entre lenguas?

Resumen

El presente estudio analizará las narraciones producidas por un grupo de hablantes nativos de inglés y de hablantes de inglés como segunda lengua. Nuestro objetivo principal será dar respuesta a las siguientes preguntas. - ¿Hay una diferencia significativa en la forma en la que hablantes nativos de inglés y hablantes de inglés como segunda lengua construyen narraciones? - ¿Hay alguna relación entre dominio y transferencia? Este proyecto incluirá una descripción de datos, el método de recolección, el perfil de los participantes, una descripción de la estructura gramatical a analizar y un análisis de los resultados después de haber sido clasificados.

Palabras clave: Tiempos narrativos, Contacto entre lenguas, Transferencia.

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In the present study the narratives produced by a group of L1 and L2 speakers of English will be examined. Our main aim will be to answer the following questions:

- Is there any significant difference in the way L1 and L2 speakers of English build their narratives?
- Is there a relationship between proficiency and transfer (e.g. does more proficiency involve less L1 transfer and less proficiency more L1 transfer?)

In order to find an answer to these questions the data used in this project were elicited by means of the wordless picture book *Frog, Where Are You?* by Mercer Mayer since our aim was to obtain experimental production data.

Our study will include the analysis of 6 Spanish speakers with an intermediate level of English, 2 Spanish speakers with an advanced level of English and 2 native English speakers.

This project will include a description of the data gathered, the method of elicitation, the profile of the participants, a description of the grammatical structure to be analysed and an analysis of the results after having been classified.

Within the intermediate group, 3 of the participants are in their early twenties and 3 in their late twenties. The youngest ones are currently studying at university whereas the others have already finished their university degrees. All of them have in common the fact that they studied English during their school years and abandoned it when they went to university.

Regarding the group of English native speakers, one of them is an American woman in her late thirties and the other one is an 18-year-old British girl.

The method of elicitation in all the cases was by means of the new technologies. We sent the frog story to all the participants by e-mail and they were asked the following question: “Can you tell me the story looking through the book? Use the past tense”. These were the only instructions they were given. That is why there is a wide variety in the length of the stories, being the ones written by the intermediate level speakers of English the shortest ones. They all knew the task was part of an assignment for a subject in our Master’s degree and some of the L2 speakers were a bit worried about the grammatical accuracy of their stories.

The story which was presented to our participants is about a boy and his dog and their search for their missing pet frog. While they are looking for it, they have many problems with different animals in the woods. In the end they find their frog which, surprisingly, has a bunch of baby frogs. The story ends with the boy and his dog returning home with one of the little frogs.

As mentioned above, the participants were told to retell the story in the past tense because we wanted to “establish a unified temporal anchor” (Berman & Slobin, 128). The reason why we chose this tense was that, as Berman & Slobin point out, it is the unmarked choice in English and in Spanish when recounting events in the narrative (131). We did not mention in our instruction what type of past tense they should use, so in our study we will analyse if there are any significant differences in the L1 and L2 narratives, as far as this aspect is concerned.

According to Viv Quarry (year), the most common narrative tenses in English are the simple past, the past continuous, the past perfect simple and the past perfect continuous.

The simple past is used to talk about finished past actions (e.g. I *woke up* at half past seven yesterday). It is also used to express past habits (e.g. I *went* to school in Madrid until my family moved to Barcelona), like “used to + infinitive” which expresses past habits or states (e.g. I *used to go* to the gym twice a week, but not anymore), and “would + bare infinitive” which expresses only past habits but not states (e.g. My dog *would never do* what I wanted it to do).

The past continuous is used to describe an action in progress at a specific time in the past (e.g. I *was reading* a book when you phoned me) as well as to describe the situation in which the events of the narrative occur (e.g. When I saw her, she *was wearing* a blue dress and *was driving* a Mercedes). It also expresses the idea of an interrupted activity (e.g. She *was cooking* dinner when the door bell rang), an unfinished activity (e.g. I *was reading* a book yesterday), a repeated action (e.g. They *were shooting* at the enemy) or a temporary situation (e.g. He *was standing* on the corner waiting for a bus).

The past perfect simple is used to show that an action or situation happened before the events in the narrative described in the simple past (e.g. I woke up at half past seven yesterday. I *had slept* very badly because I was ill) and to make a narrative more interesting to read (e.g. I woke up at half past seven yesterday. When I *had had* a shower and *eaten* breakfast, I left for work).

The past perfect continuous is used for longer activities that were happening continuously up until a specified time in the past (e.g. He looked very tired, he *had been working* very hard over the past three weeks).

Let’s move on now to comment on the structures of the tenses previously mentioned.

On the one hand, the simple past structure in English has two different possibilities, in terms of how the past is marked. Regular verbs use infinitive + -ed marking (e.g. start-started). However, irregular verbs can have the same form as the infinitive (e.g. hit-hit) or a different one (e.g. tell-told), but they never have the -ed marker. In the negative both regular and irregular verbs are formed in the same way: did + not + infinitive (e.g. He did not come). On the other hand, the structure of the past continuous consists of was/were + verb + -ing (e.g. was talking). It is the same structure both for regular and irregular verbs. As for the present simple, it is formed with the infinitive in all the persons except in the 3rd person singular where an -s is added (e.g. I walk; She walks). Regarding the past perfect, it is formed with had + past participle of the verb (e.g. had started, had slept). Finally, the passive voice in the past consists of was/were + past participle of the verb (e.g. was attacked, was taken).

The tables below include the classification of the data obtained with reference to the total number of inflected verbal forms, native-like forms and wrong forms.

Table 1. Experimental data obtained by intermediate L2 English speakers: total of inflected verbal forms

	Inflected Verbal Forms	Past Simple Forms		Past Continuous Forms		Simple Present Forms		Past Perfect Forms		Passive Forms	
Participant 1	44	38	86.36%	4	9.1%	2	4.54%	0	0%	0	0%
Participant 2	20	13	65%	5	25%	1	5%	0	0%	1	5%
Participant 3	17	12	70.6%	2	11.8%	2	11.8%	1	5.8%	0	0%
Participant 4	18	9	50%	1	5.5%	6	33.5%	1	5.5%	1	5.5%
Participant 5	42	26	62%	0	0%	16	38%	0	0%	0	0%
Participant 6	20	18	90%	0	0%	2	10%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 2. Experimental data obtained by advanced L2 English speakers: total of inflected verbal forms

	Total of Inflected Verbal Forms	Total of Past Simple Forms		Total of Past Continuous Forms		Total of Simple Present Forms		Total of Past Perfect Forms		Total of Passive Forms	
Participant 1	92	73	79.3%	6	6.5%	12	13.1%	1	1.1%	0	0%
Participant 2	69	65	94.2%	2	2.8%	1	1.5%	1	1.5%	0	0%

Table 3. Experimental data obtained by native English speakers: total of inflected verbal forms

	Total of Inflected Verbal Forms	Total of Past Simple Forms		Total of Past Continuous Forms		Total of Simple Present Forms		Total of Past Perfect Forms		Total of Passive Forms	
Participant 1	37	32	86.5%	0	0%	1	2.7%	3	8.1%	1	2.7%
Participant 2	80	64	80%	1	1.25%	1	1.25%	6	7.5%	8	10%

Analysing the data shown in the tables we observe that there is a difference between L1 and L2 speakers as far as the tenses they use to narrate a story are concerned.

On average, the intermediate participants used simple past forms 70% of the times whereas the advanced participants used it an 86% and the native speakers an 83%.

As for the past continuous, it was used by the intermediate participants in an 8.5% of the cases, the advanced speakers used it a 4.65% of the times and the native speakers only used it a 0.625%.

The simple present was used by the intermediate speakers a 17.14% of the times, by advanced participants a 7.3% and by native speakers 1.975%.

Regarding the past perfect, this tense was chosen by the intermediate participants in the 1.8% of the cases, by the advanced speakers in the 1.3% of the times and by the native speakers in the 7.8%.

Finally, the passive forms were chosen by the intermediate participants only in the 0.9% of the cases, the advanced speakers did not use this form and the native speakers used it a 6.35% of the times.

From these data we observe striking differences in the tenses L1 and L2 speakers choose when telling a narrative. Whereas the past continuous and simple present is used by both the intermediate and the advanced participants quite often, they are almost not used in the native speakers' stories.

On the other hand, while the native participants use the past perfect and the passive forms in their narratives quite a lot, their presence in the L2 stories is almost non-existent.

Table 4. Experimental data obtained by intermediate L2 English speakers: total of native-like verbal forms

	Total of Inflected Verbal Forms	Total of Past Simple Forms		Total of Past Continuous Forms		Total of Simple Present Forms		Total of Past Perfect Forms		Total of Passive Forms	
Participant 1	44	38/38	100%	3/4	75%	2/2	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Participant 2	20	13/13	100%	0/5	0%	0/1	0%	0	0%	1/1	100%
Participant 3	17	12/12	100%	1/2	50%	0/2	0%	0/1	0%	0	0%
Participant 4	18	9/9	100%	0/1	0%	0/6	0%	1/1	100%	1/1	100%
Participant 5	42	25/26	96%	0	0%	10/16	62.5%	0	0%	0	0%
Participant 6	20	18/18	100%	0	0%	2/2	100%	0	0%	0	0%
AVERAGE											

Table 5. Experimental data obtained by advanced L2 English speakers: total of native-like verbal forms

	Total of Inflected Verbal Forms	Total of Past Simple Forms		Total of Past Continuous Forms		Total of Simple Present Forms		Total of Past Perfect Forms		Total of Passive Forms	
Participant 1	92	73/73	100%	6/6	100%	12/12	100%	1/1	100%	0	0%
Participant 2	69	65/65	100%	2/2	100%	1/1	100%	1/1	100%	0	0%

Regarding the native-like forms we observe that our intermediate participants did not have problems in producing native-like past simple forms to talk about a finished action in the past (e.g. Participant 1: *When I was a child...*; Participant 2: *Finally, they found the frog*; Participant 3: *The boy was very interested on it*; Participant 4: *In one time, there was a kid that had got a frog and a dog*; Participant 5: *In the morning when Bob woke up...*; Participant 6: *Once upon a time, a boy had a frog in a bottle*). Only participant 5 used the past simple form once when he should have used the past perfect as he was describing an action that happened before the events he was narrating (e.g. *But Bob didn't realize that the dog brake the honeycomb*).

However, our intermediate participants had more difficulties in producing native-like past continuous forms. 4 out of the 6 participants used this tense at some point in their narratives and none of them managed to produce 100% of correct forms. They used this tense to talk about finished actions in the past. For instance, Participant 2 and 4 produced 0% of correct forms, whereas Participant 1 managed to produce 75% of correct forms and Participant 3 only a 50% (e.g. *They were looking for it outside the house*; *Ares and me were looking for Gustavo around 4 hours*).

In addition, we found that 4 out of our 6 participants had problems with the present tense since they used it when they should have used the simple past.

Regarding the past perfect and the passive, our intermediate participants did not produce many examples of them and when they did, they did not have any remarkable problems.

As far as the advanced participants are concerned, only Participant 1 produced 5.12% of wrong irregular past simple forms. In this case her mistakes were not due to overgeneralization of the –ed ending rule but, rather, to misspelling (e.g. *Jimmy feel on top of his face; Jimmy and Scooby feel down into a lake*).

Regarding the native-like forms, both advanced participants produce 100% of native-like forms in all the tenses.

	Irregular Past Simple Affirmative		Regular Past Simple Affirmative		Past Simple Negative		Past Aux + Inf.		Past Continuous		Passive		Past Perfect	
Participant 1	3/19	15.7%	0/12	0%	3/4	75%	2/5	40%	0/4	0%	0/0	0%	0/0	0%
Participant 2	1/11	9.1%	0/1	0%	0/0	0%	0/0	0%	0/5	0%	0/1	0%	0/0	0%
Participant 3	2/6	33%	1/5	20%	0/1	0%	0/0	0%	0/2	0%	0/0	0%	1/1	100%
Participant 4	1/5	20%	0/3	0%	0/1	0%	0/0	0%	0/1	0%	0/1	0%	0/1	0%
Participant 5	9/13	69.2%	0/9	0%	0/3	0%	0/1	0%	0/0	0%	0/0	0%	0/0	0%
Participant 6	0/7	0%	0/8	0%	0/3	0%	0/0	0%	0/0	0%	0/0	0%	0/0	0%

	Irregular Past Simple Affirmative		Regular Past Simple Affirmative		Negative Past Simple		Past Aux. + Infinitive		Past Continuous		Passive		Past Perfect	
Participant 1	2/39	5.12%	0/27	0%	0/0	0%	0/5	0%	0/6	0%	0/0	0%	0/1	0%
Participant 2	0/43	0%	0/20	0%	0/1	0%	0/1	0%	0/2	0%	0/0	0%	0/1	0%

If we analyse now the wrong forms produced by the L2 speakers, almost all our intermediate participants, as the tables above show, had problems with irregular past simple forms. In participant 1 and participant 2 the mistakes were due to an overgeneralization of the –ed rule for regular past simple forms, that is, they considered these verbs as if they were regular and they added the –ed ending (e.g. Participant 1: *knowed, thinked, taked*; Participant 2: *catched*).

Another mistake in irregular past simple forms is found in Participant 5 who misspelt the past tense of break and wrote *brake* instead of *broke*.

All the intermediate speakers, except Participant 1, produced examples in the present tense when they should have used a past tense (e.g. Participant 2: *While the boy and his dog were sleeping the frog go out the glass*; Participant 3: *While they were sleeping on the bed, the frog go out from the glass and came back to the wood*; Participant 4: *When the kid and the dog, go out to look for the little frog...*; Participant 4: *When he slept the frog want to go away from the wood house*; Participant 6: *They entered the forest and searched in the holes but they only find some bees...*).

As far as the other tenses are concerned, the participants did not produce any wrong form, with the exception of Participant 1 who had a 75% of wrong auxiliary + infinitive forms. In this case the mistake was that he marked both the auxiliary and the verb for the past tense (e.g. *couldn't saw, couldn't found*).

The current study has presented an analysis of the use of tenses in L1 and L2 English narratives, focusing on the similarities and differences among them and the possible transfer of Spanish into English in the L2 stories.

The results of the study provide evidence that L1 and L2 speakers of English choose different tenses when recounting a story in the past, being the past continuous and simple present used more by the L2 speakers and the past perfect and passive voice used more often by the native speakers.

Regarding the issue of transfer, we have to point out that it is evident that more proficiency involves less transfer, since the advanced L2 participants produced almost 100% of native-like forms. Conversely, less proficiency involves more transfer, as can be seen in the lower number of native-like forms in the intermediate L2 participants.

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