

Original Paper

Chinese Learners' Mistakes in the Acquisition of French: Case of Tenses

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Abstract

The mastery of grammatical categories is a very important aspect in the acquisition of foreign languages in general and contrastive linguistics in particular. Tenses in French are important part of French grammar. Non-Mastery of these tenses may lead to mistakes and even misunderstanding especially with French verb lexemes. Their confusion by Chinese learners often leads to mistakes. This paper uses descriptive method to analyze some of the mistakes Chinese learners are prone to making while speaking or writing French language.

Keywords

mistake, Chinese learners, learning, French language, tenses

1. Introduction

According to a widespread belief, the acquisition of the first language is fast and easy. This view has underpinned certainly the most influential conception in the research on language acquisition of the last thirty years, that of Chomsky (1959, 1965, 1975) and the “language acquisition device”. French and mandarin belong to two different language families therefore there are bound to exist some major differences. These linguistic differences are most often observed on the phonological, lexical and morpho-syntactic aspects of the two languages and have an impact in the acquisition of some notions like tenses; which could sometimes lead to confusion on the part of Chinese learners in acquisition of French language

Chinese language belongs to Sino-Tibetan languages, while French belong to the Indo-European languages. The differences between their origins influence sometimes influence their grammatical

structures. This research aims firstly at identifying and analyzing mistakes made by Chinese learners in the use of verb tenses at speaking and writing level and seeks to establish the causes of these mistakes before proposing some ways to ameliorate their acquisitions.

2. Method

2.1 Analytic and Descriptive

We adopted the descriptive analytical method to observe, analyze and describe mistakes made by Chinese learners in the acquisition of tense.

3. Result

The result of this research shows that most of Chinese learners face many difficulties in the acquisition of tenses in the French language. According to the corpus, they always use wrong tenses in sentences. Time and actions are not in accordance. After observation, the results reveal that their mistakes are mostly related to the interference of their mother tongue. Secondly, they are related to the over-generalization of the rules of French tenses. Base on the cause of these error, this paper suggest some methods, which could help Chinese learners, improve the acquisition of French verbs and tenses. The paper suggests that; teachers should emphasize the aspect-temporal values of verb forms during teaching; appropriating the use of these times will be useful for the learner, the latter will use them in appropriate contexts according to subjects and different times. Explain and try to show the Chinese learners' differences between the two languages especially when it comes to expression of the time an action took place; Use many examples to explain the divergences between Chinese and French, and emphasize on the complex nature a varied nature of French verb form. Multiply exercises related to the use of tenses. Foster writing and the use of verbal tenses from the beginning of learning, while providing the learner with the necessary tools that would help them master these skills, which are an important element in the acquisition of French.

4. Discussion

4.1 Analysis of errors

Before analyzing some of the common mistake done by Chinese learners, it is important to define the notion of verb. Jean Dubois and Rene Lagane (2001) in "Larousse Grammaire" define a verb as a variable word that expresses an action made by subject on the subject, or that indicates a state of the subject. In French, verbs change with "person" (first or second person singular or plural), gender (male or female) and with the context. During the acquisition of foreign languages, mistakes are inevitable; however, they are unavoidable as they help us to understand the concepts under study, both for the learner and for the teacher. They also permit learners to know, and learn from their mistakes. Help

teachers to identify learners' mistakes and find the way to ameliorate them and improve their teaching methods. According to the four examples, we can observe that the meaning is clear, despite the incorrect grammar tense. J. Richard (1980, pp. 173-174) classifies mistake into several categories according to their causes, but in this paper, we will limit ourselves to two kinds of mistake. The first one is intralingua mistake, which results from inadequate assimilation of the target language. These kinds of mistakes are found in learners who fail to apply all the required rules involved producing correct utterances. This can be seen in the first sentence, in which learners fails to apply all the rules concerned to produce correct statements in French. This can be one of the reasons leading to such mistakes. The second is the interlingua mistake, which originate from the source language. In the 1st, 2nd and 3rd mistake sentences, we can observe that verbs are conjugated wrongly the time and actions do not comply with sentence 2 and 3. The ending of sentence 4 is wrong. This can be another reason why learners get confused. Chinese verb do not change in form irrespective of the time the action took place or the person involved in the action. Person and gender do not influence the form of Chinese verbs unlike in French where the form of the verb changes with change in person and gender.

4.2 Causes of Mistake

The origin of mistake in second language acquisition often diversifies and varies according to the language and its linguistic characteristics. From the above sentences mistakes and based on the actual situation of Chinese learners, we can cite the following two causes: interference of the mother tongue and the over-generalization of the rules of the target language.

-Mother tongue Interference is a difficulty that most learners encounter in acquiring foreign languages. Looking at the mistakes above, we realize that in sentence 1 and 2, the verb is wrongly conjugate. According to the corpus of Chinese and French language learners, this sentence seem normal, because there is no difference in the form of Chinese verbs (the form of Chinese verbs do not change irrespective of when the action took place; past present or future). However, as we know, tense in French are expressed by changing the form of the verb and these changes depend largely on the time of the action, the subject, gender and so one. In French actions are classified into the present, future, future perfect, imperfect, simple past, this makes the acquisition of tense in French very difficult to assimilate for Chinese learners since the form of Chinese verbs do not vary too much in term of pronouncing. When expressing the time an action took place (present, past or future) or the state of the action (continuous, complete, past experience) Chinese verb, do not change in form. Chinese use some particle word like particle 了, 着, 过 to indicate the state of action 过 and words like 将, 会, 正在 (zhèngzài), 正(zhèng) or 在(zài) to express the time the action take place along with the particle 呢 (ne) at the end of the sentence to express that the action is taking place(continuous).

-The over-generalization of the rules of French, like convergence and divergence of the two languages. The verbal system of French is characterized by a multiplicity and complexity of verbal forms that are

sometimes confusing for their learners. As divergences, we have mode in French, whose elements express the intention of the speaker. The mode thus responds to pragmatic ends and reflects the state of mind of the speaker. French has five modes: the indicative, conditional, infinitive, subjunctive and imperative. In Chinese, time is not expressed like in French, which has a form of conjugation for each time. French and Chinese both have it but expressed differently in the two language ; In Chinese we just have to add the particle 过(guo) at the end of the verb, for past experience; the particle 了 after a verb to express the past tense, 将 in front of the verb to express the future.... In French, it is different as already indicated above. As example for the past experience we have 他昨天去了超市(hier, il est allé au supermarché); 我这周已经去过三次超市了(J'ai été au supermarché trois fois cette semaine) as example; present actions. For present action we have can have 我正在去超市(je vais au supermarché), 我在吃饭呢(je mange) as example; for future action we have 我明天将要去超市(Je vais aller au supermarché demai...).

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Notes

Corpus:

The sentences below are examples of ten Chinese learners' mistakes in French speaking and writing.

- 1) Avant-hier, je partir au marché pour acheter la viande.
- 2) La semaine dernière, il achète du bon boulot dans une grande ville.
- 3) Hier, nous avons parti au cinéma.
- 4) Nous somme au marché.