IN THE NAME OF GOD

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TENSE AND ASPECT IN ENGLISH: INVESTIGATING THE PRIMACY OF ASPECT (POA) IN THE PERFORMANCE OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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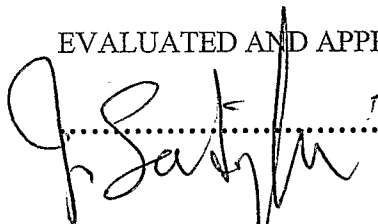
THESIS

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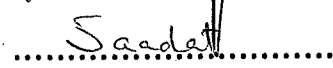OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS (M.A.)

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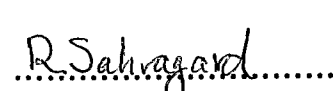EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS: **EXCELLENT**

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ABSTRACT

Tense and Aspect in English:

Investigating the Primacy of Aspect in the Performance of Iranian EFL Learners

By

Mohammad Ali Farsidoust

L1 and L2 learners use tense-aspect markers selectively according to the inherent lexical aspect of the verb to which they are associated (Andersen, 1991). The phenomenon of limiting tense-aspect markers to a restricted class of verbs (Vendler's, 1967 four-way classification) according to the inherent aspect of the verb is known as the Primacy of Aspect (Robison, 1995; Andersen and Shirai, 1996). It accounts for language learners' tense-aspect problems. Lots of studies in different languages have supported the POA principles and their influence in language acquisition (Li, 1989; Shirai and Andersen, 1995; Robison, 1995; Bardovi-Harlig, 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2001; Salaberry, 1997, 1999 and 2002; Collins, 2002; Hinkel, 2004; Stowell, 2005; Clachar, 2005, Huang and Yang, 2005; Olsen et al., 2005; Wagner, 1998 and 2006).

The present study was an attempt to investigate the POA principles in the Iranian EFL learners' performance and to diagnose their problems. Using Vendler's (1967) classification, a lexical aspect test comprising of four verb types with their tokens was devised and administered to 120 EFL learners at three proficiency levels of elementary, intermediate and advanced. The results did not confirm all of the POA principles but provided evidence for the influence of lexical aspect categories and indicated that the major problems of the learners had their roots in aspect rather than tense.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	References
Acc.	Accomplishments
Ach.	Achievements
Act.	Activities
Adv.	Advanced
AT	Absolute Tense
Df.	Degree of freedom
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
El.	Elementary
ESL	English as a Second Language
ET	Eventuality Time
HPSG	Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar
Int.	Intermediate
JSL	Japanese as a Second Language
PNPD	Punctual Non-Punctual Distinction
POA	Primacy of Aspect
PV	Particle Verbs
RT	Reference Time
RT	Relative Tense
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SL	Second Language
St.	States
SPD	State-Process Distinction
SRE	Second of speaking, Reference point, Event time
TP	Tense Phrase
VP	Verb phrase

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0. Preliminaries

This part of the thesis consists of a brief general account of tense-aspect system and a description of the Primacy of Aspect, the statement of the problem, the significance of the study and the research questions.

1.0.1. Introduction

EFL and ESL learners have to acquire the rules and principles which govern the language. The grammar of any language is a description of the rules and principles which govern and co-ordinate the relationships between parts of a sentence. Tense and aspect are among the different grammatical categories that belong to the verb phrase of any sentence. They are devices used to express time-related concepts. Mastery over these devices requires the knowledge of both form and meaning of temporal expression devices. On the one hand, tense-aspect morphology has to do with the form of these devices, and on the other hand, it involves understanding the semantics of the events in the form of verbs. Frequent errors in marking temporal expression devices indicate lack of knowledge of lexical aspect which has to do with how to encode tense and aspect in relation to the speech time. Most learners have difficulty in understanding why a verb can or cannot be used in some tenses. This is because they do not know there are verb types

which are semantically different and that one form of tense-aspect cannot be over-generalized to all verbs. This study explains the notion of the Primacy of Aspect and tests whether Iranian EFL learners follow it in their performance. The discussion of this thesis revolves around three distinct linguistic categories: grammatical tense, grammatical aspect and lexical or inherent aspect that altogether form the basis of Lexical Aspect Hypothesis or the Primacy of Aspect (Andersen and Shirai, 1996).

Tense in any language locates a situation in relation to some other point in time. The time of speaking (or speech time) is typically used as the reference point in time. For this reason, tense has been considered a deictic category (Comrie, 1985). Tense marking can be either past or non-past. There are languages (mostly isolating languages, like Chinese) where tense is not expressed anywhere in the verb or any auxiliaries, but only as adverbs of time, when needed for comprehension; and there are also languages (such as Russian) where verbs indicate aspect rather than tense. Tenses cannot be easily mapped from one language into another. While all languages have a "default" tense with a name usually translated as "present tense" (or "simple present"), the actual meaning of this tense may vary considerably (Downing and Locke, 1992). Strictly speaking, English has only two tenses: non-past tense and past tense, which are shown with the verb endings -Ø and –ed (Comrie, 1985). The distinction between grammatical tense and aspect is fuzzy and at times controversial. The English *continuous* temporal constructions express an aspect as well as a tense(e.g. present/past progressive perfect) and some, therefore, consider that aspect to be separate from tense in English (Olsen, 1997). In Spanish the traditional verb tenses are also combinations of aspectual and temporal information. Going even further, there is an ongoing dispute among modern English grammarians regarding whether *tense* can only refer to inflected forms. In Germanic languages there are very few tenses formed strictly by inflection (German and English), and one school contends that all complex

or periphrastic time-formations are <u>aspects</u> rather than tenses. Many languages define tense not just in terms of past/future/present, but also in terms of how far into the past or future they are (e.g., some Slavic languages such as Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian). Thus they introduce concepts of closeness or remoteness, or tenses that are relevant to the measurement of time into days (Hollebrandse, 1999).

In <u>linguistics</u>, the grammatical aspect of a <u>verb</u> defines the temporal flow in the described event or state. For example, in English the difference between *I swim* and *I am swimming* is a difference of aspect. Aspect is a *formal* property of a <u>language</u>. (Hollebrandse, 1999). Some languages distinguish a large number of formal aspects. Even languages that do not mark aspect formally can convey such distinctions by the use of adverbs, phrases, serial verb constructions or other means (like suffixation). The term 'aspect' refers to the internal temporal structure of events as described by verbs, verbal phrases (VP) and sentences (Comrie, 1976 and Smith, 1991). It is the property which makes it possible for a sentence to denote a bounded (terminated) or an unbounded (continuing) event (Bybee, *et al.* 1994).

The most fundamental aspectual distinction, represented in many languages, is between <u>perfective aspect</u> and <u>imperfective aspect</u>. This is the basic aspectual distinction in the Slavic languages. It semantically corresponds to the distinction between the tenses known respectively as the <u>aorist</u> and <u>imperfect</u> in Greek, the <u>preterite</u> and imperfect in Spanish, the <u>simple past</u> (passé simple) and imperfect in French, and the <u>perfect</u> and imperfect in Latin. Essentially, the perfective aspect refers to a single event conceived as a unit, while the imperfective aspect represents an event in the process of unfolding or a repeated or habitual event. In the past tense, the distinction often coincides with the distinction between the simple past "X-ed", as compared to the progressive "was X-ing". For example, the perfective would translate both verbs in the sentence "He raised his sword

and struck the enemy". However, in the sentence "As he was striking the enemy, he was killed by an arrow", the first verb would be rendered by an imperfective and the second by a perfective (Verkuyl, 1993).

Aspect is a somewhat difficult concept to grasp for the speakers of most modern Indo-European languages, because they tend to conflate the concept of aspect with the concept of tense. The two concepts are, however, mostly independent in the modern Slavic languages, such as Russian, and in Greek. Although English largely separates tense and aspect formally, its aspects (neutral, progressive, and perfect) do not correspond very closely to the distinction of perfective vs. imperfective that is common in most other languages (Verkuyl, 1993). Furthermore, the separation of tense and aspect in English is not maintained rigidly. One instance of this is the alternation, in some forms of English, between sentences such as "Have you eaten yet?" and "Did you eat yet?" Another is in the past perfect ("I had eaten"), which sometimes represents the combination of past tense and perfect aspect ("I was full because I had already eaten"), but sometimes simply represents a past action which is anterior to another past action ("A little while after I had eaten, my friend arrived"). In some languages speakers can use verbs and adverbs to express the meanings of various aspects while many Sino-Tibetan languages, like Mandarin, are devoid of tense but rich in particles which function as aspect markers (Tedeschi and Zaenen, 1981).

It is important to distinguish between two types of aspectual marking in natural languages. The first type is the viewpoint aspect which is the way of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation (Comrie, 1976). On the other hand, situation aspect (also known as lexical aspect) refers to aspectual classes of verbs (the Vendlerean classification, 1967). Verbal phrases are distributed among the four lexical classes namely states, activities, accomplishments and achievements as defined by Vendler (1967). State terms (e.g., love) describe a situation that is viewed as continuing to exist unless some outside situation makes it change. Activity

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terms (e.g., run) describe a dynamic and durative situation that has an arbitrary endpoint, i.e., it can be terminated at any time. In contrast, accomplishment terms (e.g., make a chair) describe a situation that is dynamic and durative, but has a natural endpoint after which the particular action cannot continue (i.e., they are telic). Finally, achievement terms (e.g., notice) describe an instantaneous and punctual situation, i.e., one that can be reduced to a point on a time axis. Altogether, from what Robison (1995), Andersen and Shirai (1996) have said, it is inferred that states are [-dynamic], [-telic], [-punctual]; activities are [+dynamic], [-telic], [-punctual]; accomplishments are [+dynamic], [+telic], [-punctual]; achievements are [+dynamic], [+telic], [+punctual].

The interaction of tense, grammatical and lexical aspects accounts for why verbs like *recognize, read a letter, dance* and *know* can be used in different tenses but not in all of the different aspects. L1 and L2 learners in the early stages of acquiring verbal morphology mark the tense-aspect categories according to a limitation which is inherent in the morphology of the verbs. This phenomenon has been referred to as the Primacy of Aspect (or in short POA) by Andersen and Shirai (1996). As evidenced, the notion of POA has raised a lot of conroversy in different languages since the time Vendler (1967) devised the four- way classification of verbs. Many linguists and researchers have tried to account for L1 and L2 learners' problems in language acquisition by referring to this notion and similar concepts.

A detailed account of tense, aspect and lexical aspect, as well as a number of reports of the studies about any of these temporal expression devices will be presented in Chapter Two.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Traditional grammarians have had a number of mal-effects on language and language learners. Intermingling time and tense and

combining them with aspect as a single grammatical category is one among all. Through recent linguistic studies, it has been demonstrated that as well as time, grammatical tense and aspect, lexical aspect which has to do with the semantics of the predicates is also influential. To report an event which occurs in the real world, language speakers have to employ devices which express the temporal properties of actions or situations. The acquisition of these devices in both L1 and L2 learning processes has always been accompanied with problems which have their roots in the views of traditional grammars. Since such grammars are prescriptive rather than descriptive, they have imposed to the learner what is deemed as correct. Making no distinction between time, tense and aspect can be one of such fallacies. Frequent errors in the Iranian EFL learners' use of time-related structures call for analyzing and investigating the reasons which maybe explicable according to the notion of lexical aspect or the POA hypothesis, as has been the case in different languages. The investigation of POA in this study is an attempt to explore the difficulties our EFL learners face in this regard hoping to provide some explanations for the learners' problems and to work out an applicable solution.

1.2. Significance of the study

Learning a language does not occur overnight; rather, it has to go through several stages each of which enjoys a certain level of importance. One of these stages that may mark both accuracy and fluency on the part of the learner is the acquisition of temporal expressions which belong to the grammar of a language. Explaining how to report an event in relation to the speech time, how the event is viewed by the speaker/writer and also how it develops through time is an attempt to contribute to the better understanding of tense-aspect in English.

Both the form and the meaning of the devices employed to describe an event should be taken into consideration. The form of tense-aspect tracks

the morphology of temporal devices and the meaning implies attention to how these devices (emergent tense-aspect morphemes) are used to express a particular concept (Bardovi-Harlig 2000). Through understanding the morpho-semantic nature of emergent tense-aspect, language learners can acquire the contrast among different tenses and aspects which would lead to distinguishing the meaning of one form from its semantically close neighbours. The results of this study can draw the attention of both teachers and language learners to other factors which mark accuracy and fluency and can help teachers to devise a more applicable method of teaching temporality. The results may also be useful in the field of translation and teaching Persian to non-Persian speaking learners.

1.3. Objectives of the study

The major objectives of this thesis are outlined as follows:

a) Investigating and testing the presence of the POA hypothesis in the Iranian EFL learners' performance.

b) Investigating the order and pattern of acquisition of the intrinsic restrictions of verbal morphology by Iranian learners of English.

c) Diagnosing and classifying the learners' errors.

The theoretical framework used in this study is Vendler's (1967) four-way classification and Andersen and Shirai's (1996) POA which will be fully introduced and explained in the Review of Literature chapter.

1.4. Research questions

Based on the above objectives, the researcher intends to answer the following research questions.

1. Do Iranian EFL learners follow POA in their performance? Or, is POA established in their use of tense and aspect in English?

2. Do they follow the pattern of learning for the L1 English verb types?

3. To what extent do the errors observed in the learners' performance vary across English verb types?

4. Do the errors committed by the learners vary across different proficiency levels and in what type of verbs are these differences observed?

5. Does L1 transfer play any role in this regard?

The answer to these questions may cast light on some problematic areas in learning English as a foreign language among Iranian EFL learners. The following chapter is devoted to an overview of what has been assumed about tense, aspect and the POA and recent findings on these notions in the learning of the languages of the world.