

The acquisition of *plus-que-parfait* in French by Chinese learners in French L2 and L3

Xingzi Zhang

Langage et langues, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, France

<https://doi.org/10.36505/ExLing-2017/08/0031/000333>

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to show the differences of French *plus-que-parfait* acquisition by Chinese learners in French seconde language (L2) and third language (L3) at the initial and intermediate level. Through the comparison of written samples of four groups (native speakers and learners), we found that (1) two groups of French learners sometimes uses the *passé composé* to replace the *plus-que-parfait*; (2) FL2 learners use the subordination with perfective value or lexical means to mark the double anteriority, which is influenced by their L1 Chinese; (3) FL3 learners, who have learned English as L2, are very familiar with the double anteriority indicated by the pluperfect. This likely facilitates the acquisition of the *plus-que-parfait*.

Key words: Chinese learners, *plus-que-parfait*, double anteriority, FL2, FL3

Introduction

The acquisition of French past tense as a foreign language interests many researchers. Many previous studies (Kaplan 1987, Bergström 1995, Kihlstedt 2002, Ayoun 2004) concerning the distinction between *the passé composé* and *imparfait* have been published. The *plus-que-parfait* emerges later among learners (Labeau 2002, Howard 2005, Sun 2006) and receives less attention from researchers. Howard (2005) found that advanced English learners often use the *passé composé* instead of the *plus-que-parfait*, and they often express the double anteriority by lexical or grammatical means. Howard indicates that the use of *plus-que-parfait* is stricter than that of the pluperfect:

1. I had to return home because I forgot / had forgotten my wallet.
J'ai dû rentrer à la maison parce que j'avais oublié mon portefeuille.
(Howard 2005: 70)

In this example, one could either use the *preterit* or the *pluperfect* in English to mark the double anteriority, while in French, only the *plus-que-parfait* is acceptable.

In Chinese, there is no equivalent grammatical marques as *pluperfect* in English and *plus-que-parfait* in French. Howard (2005) observed the English learners of French at the advanced level, but at the initial and intermediate

level, how do Chinese learners express the double anteriority in French? This will be explained in the following sections.

Methodology

Written samples of learners who study French as second language (L2) or third language (L3) - English as L2, were compared and the similarities and differences were determined. The written sample is a narrative based on a segment from the silent film "Modern Times". A total of four groups were included in this study. The two control groups consisted of a group of Chinese natives (CN, n = 8) and a group of French natives (FN, n = 8). The two experimental groups consisted of a group of Chinese FL2 learners (two levels, which were classified by learning time: initial, n = 6 and intermediate, n = 6) and FL3 (also two levels) were included in the study.

Results and Conclusion

Table 2. Use of *plus-que-parfait* of all verbal tenses by Chinese learners and French natives

	FL2 initial	FL3 initial	FL2 intermediate	FL3 intermediate	FN
n	2	0	3	6	8
%	1.3%	0%	1.9%	2.8%	3%

In our corpus, we found that the use of *plus-que-parfait* is limited, not only by learners, but also by French natives. In the initial stage, FL3 learners had not learned *plus-que-parfait* when the data was collected, therefore, it is expected that there is no use of *plus-que-parfait* by FL3 in the initial stage. With the development of acquisition, the use of this tense increased in both groups. The methods used by the learners to compensate the value of *plus-que-parfait* were analyzed and are shown in table 2.

In short, the passé composé is an important method to replace the *plus-que-parfait* for learners of French with different L1s and even for learners who study French as L3. Furthermore, FL2 learners, influenced by their L1, combine the lexical and grammatical methods to replace the *plus-que-parfait* value. It should also be noted that FL3 learners more frequently use the *plus-que-parfait* than FL2 learners in the intermediate stage, although the FL3 learners studied this tense later than FL2 learners. Thus, it is possible that the L2 English facilitate the *plus-que-parfait* learning in L3.

Table 3. Methods to compensate the value of *plus-que-parfait* in both groups of Chinese learners and the ways to indicate double anteriority in Chinese

Initial level (Chinese learners)	Intermediate level (Chinese learners)	Native Chinese
	Passé composé used in relative subordinations by two groups of learners : “c’était... qui” (<i>It is...that/who</i>) structure	The structure « shi...de » (It is...that/who)
		Lexical methods : « gānggāng » ou « gāngcái » (just now)
Passé composé used in indirect speech : two groups	Passé composé used in indirect speech: FL3 group	Indirect speech with perfective value (indirect speech+ suffix <i>-le</i>)
	Subordination introduced by « avant ... » (before): one FL2 learner	Subordination + lexical « 前qián... » (avant) (before)
Passé composé lonely: a FL2 learner		No marks
Causal subordination + passé composé/imparfait/ illegible verbal form : two groups	Causal subordination + plus-que-parfait : FL2 learners	

References

- Ayoun, D. 2004 The effectiveness of written recasts in the second language acquisition of aspectual distinctions in French : A follow-up study. *Modern language journal* 88, 31-35.
- Bergström, A. 1995. The expression of past temporal reference by English-speakers of French. Phd thesis, The Pennsylvania State University.
- Howard, M. 2005. The emergence and use of the plus-que-parfait in advanced French interlanguage. In *Focus on French as a foreign Language: Multidisciplinary Approaches*, J.-M. Dewaele (éds.), 63-85. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Kaplan, M. 1987. Developmental patterns of past tense acquisition among foreign learners of French, in Van Patten, B. (éds.) *Foreign language learning: A research perspective*. Rowley MA, Newbury House, 52-59.

- Kihlstedt, M. 2002. Reference to past events in dialogue: The acquisition of tense and aspect by advanced learners of French. In Salaberry R, Shirai, Y. (éds). *The acquisition of tense-aspect morphology*. Amsterdam-New York, John Benjamins, 323-361.
- Labeau, E. 2002. *The Acquisition of French Past Tenses by Tutored Anglophone Advanced Learners: Is Aspect Enough?* Thèse de doctorat, Aston University.
- Sun, J.-L. 2006. *L'acquisition de la temporalité par les apprenants sinophones de français langue étrangère et par les apprenants francophones de chinois langue étrangère*. Phd thesis. Université Sorbonne Nouvelle.