

Advanced Korean EFL Learners' Use of the English Simple Past and Present Perfect in Controlled Contexts

Minjung Park · Mun-Hong Choe*
(Chonnam National University)

Park, Minjung & Choe, Mun-Hong. (2013). Advanced Korean EFL Learners' Use of the English Simple Past and Present Perfect in Controlled Contexts. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 21(4), 119-145. This study investigates advanced Korean EFL learners' choice between the simple past and the present perfect in a controlled condition. Data were collected through a written elicitation task consisting of thirty varied contexts and in-depth interviews with twenty learners and ten native speakers. Their responses were analyzed in light of the extant accounts of the meaning and use of the present perfect. Main findings are: (1) Korean learners of English employ the two tenses appropriately especially when there are explicit lexical cues such as time adverbials; (2) they tend to overuse the simple past when they describe an event that occurred in the past but is being topicalized in the present discourse, or when it occurred at a non-specific time and may possibly continue after the utterance time; and finally, (3) they overuse the present perfect with verbs whose lexical aspect is of achievement type, overgeneralizing the resultative interpretation rule to the cases where event time requires a reference to a definite past.

Key Words: Korean EFL learners, present perfect, simple past

1. Introduction

The use of a tense/aspect marker is determined by a multitude of factors,

* Minjung Park: First author; Mun-Hong Choe: Corresponding author

including not only the speaker's linguistic knowledge but also the context of the utterance and the listener's inferential ability to interpret the speaker's intention. It has been reported that Korean EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners tend to overuse simple past while underusing present perfect (Im, 2008; Kang, 2003). This is in part because the present perfect is more marked than the simple past with regard to semantic and morphological complexity. Besides, the perfect is not productively used in Korean as the preterite form of a verb can convey a present perfect reading. For example, sentence (1a) may mean either (1b) or (1c) depending on the speech context.

- (1) a. 나는 일을 끝냈다.
 I-NOM work-ACC finish-PAST
 b. I finished my work sometime ago.
 c. I have just finished my work.

The two grammaticalized temporal categories in English have been described in terms of (a) something still true versus something no longer true, (b) something repeated as an ongoing habit from the past to the present versus something that happened at a specific time, and (c) an indefinite past time versus a definite past time (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Cowan, 2008; Quirk et al., 1985; Yule, 1998). In the classroom, the English perfect is usually taught in a structured manner. First, four distinct readings of the present perfect are introduced: (a) continuance—when the state has continued from the past to the present, (b) completion—when the action or state is recently completed, (c) result state—the action or change of state that affects the present as a result, and (d) experience—a past experience pertaining to the present state. Second, prepositions and adverbials such as *ever*, *never*, *for*, *just*, and *since* are taught as indicators to the perfect form of the main verb. Then, students are provided with lists of sentences and are asked to choose appropriate forms with little contextual information (Kang, 2003; Pounds, 2011). This instructional procedure, however, often falls short of addressing the complex interplay of the tense/aspect formatives.

Though there has been extensive research into the linguistic properties of the two temporal categories, a detailed description of errors made by learners from

different first language (L1) backgrounds and the contexts in which the errors arise remain largely unexplored. This study thus aims to reveal the extent to which advanced Korean learners of English can (or cannot) make a judicious and meaningful use of the past and present perfect. Data were collected through a forced-choice questionnaire comprising a variety of situations and in-depth interviews with twenty learners and ten native English speakers. Drawing on the findings, we attempt to identify the linguistic and contextual features of errors made by Korean EFL learners.

2. The Meaning of the Present Perfect

This section presents in highly excerpted form some of the major theories about the meaning and use of the English perfect. The present perfect has as many as four distinct readings, illustrated by (2) below (Kiparsky, 2002).

- (2) a. Existential: Fred has visited Paris several times.
- b. Universal: I have known him since 1960.
- c. Resultative: They have probably caught the suspect by now.
- d. Recent Past: Ferdinand has been assassinated in Sarajevo.

One generally accepted explanation is that (a) the present perfect is used when talking about a period of time that continues from the past until the speech time, (b) it is used to give information or to announce a recent event, and (c) it is used for an activity that has recently stopped, so there is a connection with the present moment. Opinions differ on whether the readings in (2) are semantically distinct, or are pragmatic interpretations of a basic meaning. Some notable attempts to link the basic meaning of the perfect (i.e., event time precedes reference time) with its polysemous usage by appealing to pragmatic principles include McCoard (1978) and Klein (1992, 1994), who hold that the present perfect is used when the occurrence of the past event is somehow relevant to present concerns. McCoard (1978) classifies the accounts of the meaning of the present perfect into three kinds.¹⁾

1) Another account known as Embedded Past Theory is excluded here because it deals with

(3) a. Current Relevance

The continuance of the result of a past event into the present

b. Indefinite Past

Indicating an event that happened at an indefinite past time

c. Extended Now

An interval of time which begins in the past and includes the utterance time, and hence there is no distinction between 'then' and 'now'

According to Current Relevance Theory, when an event that started in the past continues up to the present, speakers use the present perfect.

(4) a. She has injured her arm.

b. She injured her arm.

(5) Where is your key? I don't know. I have lost it.

Although the event in (4) occurred in the past, (4a) implies that her arm has not healed yet, whereas (4b) does not imply the meaning. In sentence (5), the speaker indicates that she does not have the key now—the present perfect entails that there are potential ramifications stemming from the loss of the key in the context. Saurer (1984) summarizes the notion of current relevance in respect of five conditions: (a) the recency of the past action, (b) present existence, (c) continuance of a state into the present, (d) any unspecified connection with the present, and (e) present possibility.

Meanwhile, Indefinite Past Theory claims that the present perfect marks an event which happened before the utterance time, but the event time is not marked for a specific past time. On the contrary, the simple past is located within a specific past time. Thus, the difference lies in that the present perfect refers to an indefinite past while the simple past refers to a definite past. For example, definite time adverbials can be used only in the past constructions.

subordinate clauses which are not of direct concern to the present study.

- (6) a.*He has left New York yesterday.
 b. He left New York yesterday.

As illustrated in (6), the present perfect cannot concur with a definite past adverbial like *yesterday*. In this regard, simple past and present perfect are analogous to definite and indefinite articles (Leech, 1971).

- (7) a. He has received her proposal; it took us by surprise.
 b. A: I've been to Seoul once. B: How did you like it?

In (7), simple past is used to respond to the prior present perfect sentence, where the latter refers to some indefinite time in the past. Klein (1992), building on Reichenbach's (1947) reference point theory, proposes three time parameters in order to account for this phenomenon: time of utterance (TU), topic time (TT), and time of situation (Tsit). He argues that in the perfect, Tsit is not the time about which the claim is being made. However, in the simple past, TT and Tsit concur, and Tsit is also the time when the claim is being made. In the present perfect, TT concurs with TU. TT is definite while Tsit is not. This explains why definite temporal adverbials cannot be used with the present perfect. He also introduces the notion of 'scope solution,' which postulates that adverbs like *yesterday* cannot appear in a position where they would have a scope only over the VP.

- (8) a.*Chris has yesterday arrived.
 b.*Chris has last year been in Pontefract.
 c. Chris has just/recently arrived.
 d.*Just/²Recently, Chris has arrived. (Klein, 1992: 529)

The position in question is allowed only for exceptional past adverbs like *just* and *recently*, as shown in (8c). If such adverbs appeared in sentence initial position, the result would be odd.

The notion of 'extended now' is a longer stretch of time than the momentary 'now' utilized for conversational purposes (Portner, 2000). It is an interval of time which begins in the past and also includes the utterance time. To put it in

another way, the present perfect is the past including the present and the simple past is the past excluding the present. So the present perfect tells us something about the current status of affairs with its emphasis put on the present tense *have/has*, so to speak.

(9) *Liz has arrived last week.

Portner argues that *last week* in (9) has a scope over the perfect, and it is incompatible with the requirement that the extended now includes the utterance time. Similarly, Zagona (2007) points out that some events in the present perfect can be understood as continuing into the present wherein the event time corresponds to a part of the utterance time. Therefore, sentences such as (10) sound unnatural because the impact of the event is not construed within the extended now.

(10) *Gutenberg has discovered the art of printing.

It has been further suggested that the acquisition of morphological tense and aspect markers is influenced by the inherent semantic properties of the verb in use. One widely acknowledged attempt to classify verbs in terms of situation type is Vendler (1967) (see also Smith, 1991 for further elaboration). According to him, verbs come in four varieties with respect to their lexical aspect: state (no dynamics such as *see*, *love*, and *know*), activity (duration and homogeneity such as *run*, *sing*, and *dance*), accomplishment (duration with an inherent end point such as *walk a mile* and *reach a place*), and achievement (single point in time such as *find*, *finish*, and *notice*). In the use of the present perfect where the verb is stative, there is an implication that the pre-existing situations being described will continue (Yule, 1998). Katz (2003) also proposes that the restriction on the temporal modification of the present perfect is a consequence of the modal presuppositions associated with the perfect. That is, the present perfect presupposes it is possible for the described event to occur at a time after the utterance time, given what the speaker and hearer take to be the case. Consider (11) for example.

- (11) a. He has believed in Allah all his life.
- b. We have known Fred for many years.
- c. She has hated him since she first met him. (Yule, 1998: 66)

Stative verbs have potentially unlimited duration. Therefore, the sentences can be interpreted as describing past states that have lasted up to the moment of speaking and may last in the future. Moreover, activity verbs describe an action involving a change of state over an unbounded period of time. The perfect of these verbs imparts the meaning of completion which is often enhanced by the time expressions of duration.

- (12) a. The value of the house has doubled over the past few years.
- b. Her condition has improved considerably in the last three days.

On the other hand, achievement verbs in present perfect express a recently completed action.

- (13) a. The team has reached the peak of the Mount Everest.
- b. Her flight has arrived.

While achievement verbs denote actions that occur instantaneously, accomplishment verbs express an action that occurred at an unspecified time and has current relevance.

- (14) a. He has read all of the author's novels.
- b. Bill has written a new novel.

Language acquisition studies show that children are sensitive to lexical aspect in the encoding of past events (Antinucci & Miller, 1976; Bloom, Lifter, & Hafitz, 1980; Bronckart & Sinclair, 1973). An early version of the so-called aspect hypothesis stated that in beginning stages of language acquisition, only inherent aspectual distinctions are encoded by verbal morphology, not tense or grammatical aspect (Andersen, 1991). It is then reasonable to assume that language learners will also be influenced by the inherent semantic aspect of

verbs in the acquisition of tense and aspect (Andersen & Shirai, 1994). For example, Bardovi-Harlig (1992a) found that achievement verbs showed more frequent use of simple past than state or activity verbs.

Based on the theories briefly outlined in the foregoing, it is presumed that Korean EFL learners would likely be affected by the same theoretical constructs, i.e., current relevance, indefinite past, extended now, and verbal lexical aspect, in their use of the present perfect. In reference to such constructs, this study addresses the question of where exactly the learners are capable of using the present perfect appropriately and what linguistic and contextual factors lead to confusion between the simple past and the present perfect.

3. Methods

Ten native speakers of English (NES) and twenty advanced Korean learners of English (KES) participated in this study. The NES were seven Americans, two Canadians and one Australian. The KES were all graduate students majoring in English whose TOEIC scores were above 800. They had studied English over ten years with experience of living in English-speaking countries for at least one year.

At the preliminary stage, we had created twelve sentential contexts and asked participants to judge whether the use of tense and aspect in each sentence is correct. However, the grammaticality judgement task in a minimal discourse context did not provide much information about the processes and reasons leading to their decisions. So, we made use of thirty three written monologues and dialogues in meaningful contexts and asked participants to choose either the simple past or the present perfect. A pilot test was conducted with two NES and five KES in order to check the feasibility of the test. Through this process, three items were eliminated, and words or expressions that might complicate the readers' understanding of the given situations were replaced. The finalized version was composed of eight monologues and twenty two dialogues. After having collected and analyzed the data from the questionnaire, we contacted the participants again and interviewed five NES and seven KES about the reasoning behind their choices.

4. Results and Discussion

Those items chosen by over 80 per cent of each group were classified as strong preference and the others as no or weak preference. The overall results from the two groups are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 1 Overall Comparison between English and Korean Speakers

Group	Choice	Strong Preference	No or Weak Preference
Native English Speakers (N=10)	Simple Past	8	4
	Present Perfect	18	
Korean EFL Speakers (N=20)	Simple Past	8	12
	Present Perfect	10	

The NES agreed on the use of the present perfect more often than the KES did. The NES showed strong preferences for the simple past on eight items, for the present perfect on eighteen items, and with no or weak agreement on four items. On the other hand, the KES showed strong preferences for the simple past on eight items and for the present perfect on ten items. They did not converge to either option on as many as twelve items.

In what follows, we take a close look at the two groups' response patterns. In section 4.1, we first look at the items that have produced no consensus among the NES. These items suggest that the given contexts are inherently ambiguous or that the two tenses in question can be used interchangeably with no significant difference in meaning. In section 4.2, those that have elicited a similar pattern of response from the two groups are discussed. These items are considered to have been acquired by the KES to the extent comparable to the NES. Finally, section 4.3 examines the contexts in which the two groups show a substantial degree of difference in response rates. A total of eleven out of thirty items fell in this category, among which nine items induced the Korean L1 speakers' overuse of the simple past in place of the present perfect, and two did the other way around.

4.1 Items Producing Mixed Responses

There were four items in which the NES gave mixed responses. Among them three items drew a compatible pattern from the KES as well while one item found a great variation.

- (15) A: Do you think we will be able to play baseball today?
 B: I don't think so. It (rained / has rained) a lot today. The ground will be all wet.

TABLE 2 Results from Item 15

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	50%	50%
KES	45%	55%

In (15), the distinction between the two tenses appears to lie in current relevance. Since it is unknown whether it is still raining or not, either could be used. A few NES mentioned in the interviews that both would work because they don't know if it is raining or it has stopped. Two KES who had chosen the present perfect said that the following sentence, *the ground will be all wet*, gives a clue to the continuance of raining at the moment. Another Korean participant asserted that the simple past would be more natural because the adverb *today* refers to a point of time which is normally used with the simple past.

- (16) Parliament (asked / has asked) some of the nation's top scientists to determine whether mobile phones pose a health hazard to children who regularly use them.

TABLE 3 Results from Item 16

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	50%	50%
KES	55%	45%

The present perfect in this context makes it feel more formal and recent. It

may also imply that the questioning is still open with no reference to a final answer. However, if one construes the asking as an action that happened in the past and the answer was already given, the simple past will be used. For example, an NES stated in the interview “it’s current news, so in the body text is going to be the present perfect to make it feel more now.” Another NES, however, replied, “parliament asked in the past and then studies have found, therefore, simple past is more natural in this sentence.” While the English L1 speakers’ choice of the present perfect has more to do with the notion of extended now, many of the KES consider the use of the present perfect as indicating a repeated action of asking up until now.

- (17) A: Rachel (was / has been) on television!
 B: Really? When were you on television Rachel?
 C: I was on a game show last year.

TABLE 4 Results from Item 17

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	40%	60%
KES	95%	5%

In (17), almost all the KES chose the simple past, but the NES were divided. One of the NES who favored the present perfect said that the simple past could be used in colloquial English, but the information provided by speaker A is ‘hot news’ which comes to be topicalized in the current discourse. In other words, people would use the present perfect when they say something unexpected, unknown, and marked, or when the situation is pertinent to the present. Because the situation spoken of is unexpected, the present perfect is more appropriate. This statement is consistent with Katz’s (2003) account—the relevant pragmatic context for a ‘hot news’ perfect is one in which the speaker thinks the hearer is aware that an event of the given type might occur, but he does not know that it has occurred, and the speaker exploits this presupposition to create the hot news effect.

Another interviewee who had chosen the simple past remarked that *was* would imply that the event in question happened at a specific time like ‘last

night' while *has been* would mean that it happened at some indefinite prior period in time. That is, the simple past indicates that the occurrence of the event was recent and one time, but the present perfect indicates one time or more at a non-specific time. Since the person in (17) is excited, it is supposed to be recent, hence more likely to be understood as having occurred at a definite time point. Interestingly, the NES themselves differ in their opinions as to the primary use or function of the present perfect, viz., some give priority to current relevance over indefinite past while others give priority to indefinite past over current relevance.

(18) A: How's Jack?

B: I don't know. He (seemed / has seemed) kind of odd ever since he came home from work. He's staring at a wall now.

TABLE 5 Results from Item 18

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	30%	70%
KES	25%	75%

Here the majority of the NES and KES alike chose the present perfect. Their judgments seem to be based on the subordinate clause headed by *since* which suggests that the behavior started in the past and continues into the present. Nonetheless, a considerable number of participants chose the simple past in spite of the presence of *since*. One English L1 interviewee mentioned that *has seemed* doesn't feel natural; it seems unnecessary and formal. This intuition can be attributed to the semantic properties of *seem* which impart the speaker's perspective additive to, rather than directly combined with, the main proposition and whose stative aspect signifies a lasting state over a period without being overtly (and somewhat redundantly) marked by the perfect form. Another noteworthy remark was made by an English L1 speaker on the usage of the present perfect with *since*:

The present perfect feels better as he has been doing it since his return from work. But *work* here would mean seasonal or long shift work like oil rig workers who go

away for months on end and then have lengthy periods of free time off; it would not mean a normal day job because *has seemed* implies a longer passage of time than a normal 9 to 5 job would entail (JM, personal communication, May, 2013).

4.2 Items Producing Similar Response Patterns

The NES and KES responded to fourteen items in more or less similar ways.

4.2.1 L1-L2 Comparable Use of the Simple Past

Five items have prompted the participants to choose the simple past over the present perfect, as seen in (19)~(23).

(19) A: How was your weekend?

B: My girlfriend and I went to see a movie yesterday. We really (enjoyed / have enjoyed) watching Tom Cruise. How was yours?

TABLE 6 Results from Item 19

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	100%	0%
KES	100%	0%

The NES and KES unanimously picked the simple past in this context. Since the event and reference time in the conversation keeps to the past throughout, the simple past is the obvious choice. It appears that Korean EFL learners can acquire this basic function of the simple past without any difficulty.

(20) At first, ice-cream tasted good, but when my mother bought me ice cream for the sixteenth time, I (started / have started) to feel sick and had to run out of the studio. I haven't eaten ice cream since then.

TABLE 7 Results from Item 20

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	100%	0%
KES	90%	10%

All the NES and the majority of the KES chose the simple past in this context. The event happened at the moment when the speaker ate ice cream for the sixteenth time. It was observed that two Korean learners of English mistakenly applied the tense sequence rule not just within the sentence but across the neighboring sentences. For example, one of the two mentioned in the interview that she had chosen the perfect form because of *haven't eaten* in the following sentence. This suggests, albeit tentatively, that some Korean L1 speakers draw up a strategy to keep a tense in discoursal, rather than sentential, context. Of course, how Korean speakers relate events by means of a sequence of tenses in narrative and conversational discourse and how it differs cross-linguistically remain to be researched.

(21) A: Why aren't you hungry?

B: I (ate / have eaten) four pizzas this afternoon.

A: You shouldn't eat that much.

TABLE 8 Results from Item 21

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	90%	10%
KES	90%	10%

In the interview, the only NES who had chosen the present perfect replied that speaker A is emphasizing the result of his action, and therefore the present perfect is more natural. Yet, the other nine NES chose the simple past, which means that they construed the act of eating as a historic fact that was not ongoing beyond the reference time, i.e., some time this afternoon. Quite a few KES who had chosen the simple past said *ate* would be proper because of the temporal expression, *this afternoon*. This indicates they take it more sensible that the event of the speaker's eating four pizzas occurred during one specific period of time this afternoon rather than it has continued (or extended) to the moment of speaking. Most Korean participants are also aware that a resultative reading in this context is awkward because the result state of being full is an inference from the event, not an entailment of it.

(22) A: What's so interesting?

B: Oh, I (didn't hear / haven't heard) you come in. I'm thinking of investing in the shopping center going up near Tiburon Beach.

TABLE 9 Results from Item 22

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	100%	0%
KES	80%	20%

(23) Scott is ten and has dreams of becoming famous. Just last week, he (appeared / has appeared) in an ice-cream commercial. Scott talked to Blockbusters magazine about this experience.

TABLE 10 Results from Item 23

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	100%	0%
KES	80%	20%

All the NES chose the simple past in (22) and (23). However four KES chose the present perfect. The NES agreed that 'hearing somebody come in' and 'appearing in a commercial last week' are actions that occurred at a definite past time. It is worth noting that some of the advanced learners might not internalize the grammatical constraint that requires definite past adverbials like *just last week* in (23) to be used only with the simple past. On the face of it, they are not aware that the present perfect imposes the sense of indefinite past. An interviewee who had chosen the present perfect in (23) said, "I think the person has appeared repeatedly in the TV commercial, and he is likely to be seen in the commercial in the present time because it just started last week." This suggests that the interviewee's judgment was made by her inferential understanding of the given situation on the basis of world knowledge instead of the linguistic context confined to the sentence.

4.2.2 L1-L2 Comparable Use of the Present Perfect

Almost all the items where the KES opted for the present perfect include

temporal adverbials such as *yet*, *since 2 o'clock*, *for two days*, *in months*, and so on. They seem to take those adverbials as strong clues to the present perfect. As a matter of fact, many English grammar books in Korea put emphasis on the pairing of such temporal adverbials and the present perfect construction. For example, adverbials such as *ever*, *never*, *before*, and *once* are said to coincide with the present perfect in existential meaning, and *just*, *already*, and *yet* in recent completion meaning. This rule-based instruction in the classroom might exert a profound effect on the learners' initial conceptualization of the present perfect. Consider (24) and (25) for example.

- (24) A: Someone broke the window in my house today. I think it was your children.
 B: It was not them. They (were / have been) home since 2 o'clock.

TABLE 11 Results from Item 24

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	0%	100%
KES	20%	80%

- (25) A: Last night, I finally told Lisa how I feel about her.
 B: What did you tell her?
 A: That I (felt / have felt) this way for a very long time that I really care about her.

TABLE 12 Results from Item 25

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	0%	100%
KES	20%	80%

When there is an explicit time expression like *since* and *for a long time*, the NES and KES alike chose the present perfect, although there were a small number of KES who did not grasp the meaning association of the present perfect and the temporal adverbials.

- (26) I can barely remember life without television. I (spent / have spent) 20,000 hours of my life in front of television. Not all my contemporaries watched so much, but many did.

TABLE 13 Results from Item 26

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	0%	100%
KES	25%	75%

In this context, *have spent* would be used when the speaker is still a TV watcher and *spent* if talking about a period of one's life that is bounded and finished. Five KES who had chosen the simple past invariably said that the speaker had already spent 20,000 hours in front of television in the past, and not any longer in the present. The NES, however, all consent that the simple past reading would be odd when talking about a form of entertainment. For them, watching TV is regarded as a frequent and continuous action so that the present perfect is more natural.

- (27) A: Really? Did you call a plumber?
 B: Yeah. He was supposed to be here half an hour ago, but he (didn't show up / hasn't shown up yet).
 A: Don't worry. I'll be home soon.

TABLE 14 Results from Item 27

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	20%	80%
KES	20%	80%

Two NES who had chosen the simple past said that the conversation does not talk about him still not showing up but just that he did not in the past. However the other NES who had chosen the present perfect replied *half an hour* is a time period in which it is still possible (so is expected) that he might appear, so is relevant to the current time.

4.3 Items Producing L1-L2 Different Response Patterns

4.3.1 L2 Learners' Overuse of the Simple Past

Nine out of thirty items induced a considerable number of KES to choose the simple past where the NES generally favored the present perfect. It can be said that these are the properties of the present perfect that constitute barriers to Korean EFL learners' full mastery of its usage.

(28) A: Do you like this poem?

B: This is a poem whose meaning I can't understand, although (I heard it before / I have heard it before).

TABLE 15 Results from Item 28

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	0%	100%
KES	60%	40%

In this example, all the NES used the present perfect whereas only 40% of the KES did so and the rest 60% chose the simple past instead. The NES seem to agree that the event is in both the past and present and that the topic time is here and now. The use of the verb *hear* suggests the poem is being recited live, and because the speakers are talking about comprehension, there is some sense that it has been thought about but no understanding was forthcoming. As one English L1 interviewee put it, the present perfect suggests some "greater familiarity with the poem and the simple past less." As it were, the simple past foregrounds the past time when the speaker heard the poem while backgrounding its current context, but the present perfect foregrounds the speaker's experience in connection with the present discourse topic while backgrounding the information about the time point of the experience in the past.

(29) A: What's wrong with it?

B: This milk (went / has gone) bad.

TABLE 16 Results from Item 29

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	20%	80%
KES	70%	30%

The majority of the KES chose the simple past unlike the NES who favored the present perfect. In this context, using the present perfect stresses the current state of the milk. One English L1 speaker who had chosen the present perfect said, “milk, soured, is not for drinking and so has a certain period for a while (say, before it goes almost solid) in which it is still deemed to be milk, and during this period using the present perfect alerts us to its status.” Similarly, another interviewee mentioned the present perfect is appropriate because the speaker talks about a period of time that has continued from the past up to now. Moreover, it was pointed out that the question is asked in present tense, and so it demands the interlocuter to answer in correspondence to the reference time.

(30) A: What is the problem?

B: I (had / have had) so many problems with my project that I decided to start over.

TABLE 17 Results from Item 30

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	10%	90%
KES	50%	50%

(31) My spouse is a good man when it comes to my experimentation in the kitchen. Over the years I (had / have had) some dismal failures, and he has always accepted these meals with good grace.

TABLE 18 Results from Item 31

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	0%	100%
KES	40%	60%

(32) A: This is not a good time to buy a house. You know the recession (began / has begun).

B: Right. Before we make our decision, what else do we have to think over?

TABLE 19 Results from Item 32

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	10%	90%
KES	35%	65%

In (30), most NES consider the problems to have occurred frequently and recently. As there is no indication of completion of the project, such problems may possibly occur in the future as well, and hence are still relevant to present concerns. On the contrary, the one who had chosen the simple past noted, “if speaking to a higher superior in a work situation, thus someone not being connected with the project, you could use the simple past as for them it is a question of facts more so than having to deal with the details.”

In (31), the NES chose the present perfect because it evokes the idea that the spouse is still making mistakes and the present perfect makes it feel more ongoing. This is again consistent with Katz (2003) who argues that the present perfect presupposes it is possible for the described event to occur beyond the utterance time. It turned out that 40% of the advanced learners did not acquire this aspect of the present perfect (i.e., indefinite time boundary). Likewise, the recession in (32) started in the past but is happening now. Thus, *has begun* is the better choice for a recession is likely to go on for years; it implies we expect it to continue for some time. The only person who had chosen the simple past said, “*has begun* makes it sound very formal, like we were expecting it, but it’s something that just happened.”

(33) A: What is the most interesting food you have ever eaten?

B: I (ate / have eaten) octopus.

A: Really? Was it delicious?

B: No, I didn’t like it at all.

TABLE 20 Results from Item 33

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	10%	90%
KES	40%	60%

It goes without saying that the present perfect would match the tense form in the question. It is used to describe an action that has happened so far. Speaker A asks about one's experience over an indefinite time period, demanding a response that relates to the current situation. As an interviewee put it, "we're talking about an ongoing status, it [octopus] wasn't the weirdest in the past, but it still is the weirdest."

- (34) Each of us (probably wanted / has probably wanted) to live another life, even if only for a brief time. It is not a matter of being dissatisfied with our own lives, but it is more a curiosity about the road not traveled.

TABLE 21 Results from Item 34

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	20%	80%
KES	35%	65%

The present perfect here is highlighting the notion of current relevance; the situation is pertinent to the present status of affairs. Using simple past would make it more of a historical narrative, changing the meaning considerably. One English L1 speaker remarked, "it probably happened to people before and they will probably do it again in the future. Still we have our own life. The simple past sounds like they're in the funeral." Another interviewee pointed to the unrealis modality of the situation, saying "it's hypothetical, not something just in the past truly.

4.3.2 L2 Learners' Overuse of the Present Perfect

In contrast to the cases above, there are contexts in which the KES overuse the present perfect in place of the simple past.

(35) A: Do you have your phone on you?

B: Oh no! My phone is in my purse, and I (left / have left) my purse at home.

A: Oh that's terrible. Let's go back and get it.

TABLE 22 Results from Item 35

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	90%	10%
KES	75%	25%

(36) A: Can you help me? I (lost / have lost) my contact lenses.

B: I'm sorry, I can't. I am in a hurry.

TABLE 23 Results from Item 36

	Simple Past	Present Perfect
NES	80%	20%
KES	55%	45%

As mentioned before, Korean learners of English are routinely taught the present perfect in terms of four interpretation rules. It is not uncommon that learners overgeneralize the rules without taking into consideration the semantic and pragmatic factors involved in the use of the present perfect. For example, one of the accepted teaching practices introduces the resultative reading of the present perfect as follows: 'John has lost his key' implies that he does not have his key now, but 'John lost his key' tells only that he lost his key at some time in the past. Given that this grossly simplified instruction is widespread in Korea, it is not surprising that a considerable number of the KES adopted the present perfect in these contexts.

In (35), simple past is used to describe an event that happened in the past, as the consequence has been stated in the previous sentence. It can be ascribed in part to the lexical aspect of the verb. To leave something is an instance of achievement – one leaves something behind or take it, not both or partially. An English L1 speaker put it, "You can't keep leaving a phone. You can only leave

it once. The action is finished.” Another interviewee also mentioned, “It’s an action from the past. I’m not still leaving it, which doesn’t really make sense.”

In a similar vein, the action of losing the lenses in (36) was finished. However, it seems that the choice depends on the immediacy in time and importance of the lens. If the speaker needs a contact lens and can’t see without it, then present perfect might be the better choice. In this case, the situation feels ongoing because the speaker is in the process of searching. “if it were present perfect, then the implication would be that you help the person find it. If it were simple past, it might mean you are telling the other person there is a problem and so something else needs to be done, like buying new ones, etc,” said one of the NES. One of the two English speakers who had chosen the present perfect said, “either may be fine. But if I observe or I am with you when it happens, the moment it happens, we use the present perfect.” Between the simple past and the present perfect, there seems to be a very fine-grained decision making process for the speaker to arrive at a choice. The complex interplay of the two tenses are hardly learnable without recourse to a plethora of input situated in authentic contexts.

To sum up, Korean learners of English can employ the two tenses appropriately especially when there are explicit lexical cues such as temporal adverbials; they tend to overuse simple past when they describe an event that occurred in the past but is being topicalized in the present discourse or when the event occurred at a non-specific time and is presupposed to occur again after the speaking time; and finally, they overuse present perfect with verbs whose lexical aspect is of achievement type, overgeneralizing the resultative interpretation rule to the cases where the event time requires a reference to a definite point in the past.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that the use of the English tense and aspect depends not only on lexical semantics but also on pragmatic situations. Korean learners of English seem to attend more to lexical cues than to contextual settings. Teaching and learning the subtle nuances produced by a complex

interplay of multiple parameters involved in tense/aspect expressions is one of the most challenging areas in the EFL classroom. They can only be learnable when the learners are provided with sufficient input which contains rich information about the conversation participants' shared construal of the event or situation being described.

Although this paper has discussed in what lexical or pragmatic contexts Korean EFL learners are prone to misuse the English past and present perfect, thirty written questions are surely insufficient for a comprehensive picture of their performance errors. It would be desirable to make use of more systematic and controlled tasks to disclose the precise nature of L2 learners' use of the target grammar. Furthermore, since Korean learners of English have difficulty mostly with the pragmatic aspects of the present perfect, subsequent studies have to investigate why some features of the present perfect are not easy to learn in the EFL environment and how instructional materials and procedures can be better drawn up based on the findings.

References

- Andersen, R. W. (1991). Developmental sequences: The emergence of aspect marking in second language acquisition. In T. Huebner & C. A. Ferguson (Eds.), *Crosscurrents in second language acquisition and linguistic theories* (pp. 305-324). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Andersen, R. W., & Shirai, Y. (1994). Discourse motivations for some cognitive acquisition principles. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 16, 133-156.
- An, Dong-hwan. (1984). A survey of semantic treatments of the English perfect tense form. *English Language and Literature Association of Korea*, 30(2), 429-458.
- Antinucci, F., & Miller, R. (1976). How children talk about what happened. *Journal of Child Language*, 3, 167-189.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1992a). The relationship of form and meaning: A cross-sectional study of tense and aspect in the interlanguage of learners of English as a second language. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 13, 253-278.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman*

- grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow, England: Longman.
- Bloom, L., Lifter, K., & Hafitz, J. (1980). Semantics of verbs and development of verb inflection in child language. *Language*, 56, 386-312.
- Bronckart, J. P., & Sinclair, H. (1973). Time, tense and aspect. *Cognition*, 2, 107-130.
- Bryan, W. (1936). The preterite and the perfect tense in present-day English. *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 35, 363-382.
- Carlota, S. S. (2007). Tense and temporal interpretation. *Lingua*, 117, 419-436.
- Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course* (2nd ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Choe, Hoh-sung. (2007). A case study on the acquisition of the present perfect: Interlanguage of an adult ESL learner. *Modern English Education*, 8(3), 17-37.
- Cowan, R. (2008). *The teacher's grammar of English: A course book and reference guide*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Iatridou, S., Anagnostopoulou, E., Izvorski, R. (2001). Observations about the form and meaning of the perfect. In Kenstowicz, M. (Ed.), *Ken Hale: A Life in Language* (pp. 153-205). MIT Press.
- Ilse, D. (1998). On the resultative character of present perfect sentences. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 29, 597-613.
- Im, Ja-yeon. (2008). The lexical aspect of English present perfect in advanced L2 learners' writing. *Modern English Education*, 9(2), 42-57.
- Inoue, K. (1979). An analysis of the English present perfect. *Linguistics*, 17, 561-589.
- Kang, In-sun. (2003). Past and present perfect tense in English: Challenges for native Korean learners. *English Language Teaching*, 15(3), 27-52.
- Kang, Moon-gu. (2007). An effective strategy on teaching and learning English tense in the EFL education. *English Language and Literature*, 13(3), 133-156.
- Katz, G. (2003). A modal account of the English present perfect puzzle. In *Proceedings of SALT* (Vol. 13, pp. 145-161).
- Kiparsky, P. (2002). Event structure and the perfect. *The construction of meaning*, 113-136.
- Klein, W. (1992). The present perfect puzzle. *Language*, 68, 525-552.
- Klein, W. (1994). *Time in language*. London: Routledge.

- Kwon, Yong-hyun. (2001). Markedness and function of present perfect. *Modern English Education*, 19(2), 113-134.
- Lee, Bok-hee. (2008). A semantic analysis of the English present perfect form. *English Language and Literature*, 87, 219-247.
- Leech, G. N. (1971). *Meaning and the English verb*. London: Longman.
- McCoard, R. W. (1978). *The English perfect: Tense-choice and pragmatic inference*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company.
- Portner, P. (2003). The (temporal) semantics and (modal) pragmatics of the perfect. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 26(4), 459-510.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, G., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.
- Pounds, R. H. (2011). *Analysis of approaches to the present perfect tense in English textbooks published in Japan and in English-speaking countries*. Doctoral dissertation, Ball State University.
- Reichenbach, H. (1947). *Elements of symbolic logic*. London: Macmillan.
- Saurer, W. (1984). A formal semantics of tense, aspect and aktionsarten. *Indiana University Linguistics Club*, 13, 577-695.
- Smith, C. S. (1991). *The parameter of aspect*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Vendler, Z. (1967). *Linguistics in philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Yoon, Woong-jin. (2000). A study on the function and use of English present tense in discourse. *The Journal of English Language Teaching*, 12(1), 295-314.
- Yule, G. 1998. *Explaining English grammar*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zagona, K. (2007). Some effects of aspect on tense construal. *Lingua*, 117, 464-502.

Park, Minjung

Hanshin APT 101-1102

Seo-gu, Pungam-dong, Gwangju 502-156

E-mail: mekcai@hanmail.net

Tel: 010-2630-3755

Choe, Mun-Hong

Department of English Education

Chonnam National University

Yongbong-ro 77, Gwangju 500-070

E-mail: munhong@jnu.ac.kr

Tel: 062) 530-2435

Received on June 30, 2013

Revised version received on November 30, 2013

Accepted on December 10, 2013