Tense or Aspect?: A Review of Initial Past Tense Marking and Task Conditions for Beginning Classroom Learners of Spanish

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Tense or Aspect?:
A Review of Initial Past Tense Marking and Task Conditions for Beginning Classroom Learners of Spanish

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Abstract: This essay contributes to the research on the emergence of tense/aspect morphology by reviewing the results and task conditions of studies supporting either the Aspect Hypothesis (AH) or the Default Past Tense Hypothesis (DPTH) for second language (L2) learners of Spanish. The AH has found that past marking emerges based on inherent aspectual categories (Andersen 1991; Andersen and Shirai 1994), and the DPTH proposes (Salaberry 1999, 2002, 2003, 2008; Salaberry and Ayoun 2005) that beginning learners of Spanish with first language (L1) English initially use perfective past marking as a default tense marker. The present study reviewed the results and task conditions of studies of beginning classroom learners of Spanish with L1 English that support either hypothesis. The review shows that many learners go through a stage of marking preterite regardless of lexical aspect particularly in tasks requiring an explicit focus on forms or in impersonal narratives. On the other hand, beginning learners show prototypical associations of preterite marking with telic predicates in open-ended tasks or personal narratives, and stronger associations of imperfect marking with state verbs especially in personal narratives.

Keywords: aspect/aspecto, imperfect/imperfecto, narrative/narración, preterite/pretérito perfecto simple, task type/tipo de tarea, tense/tiempo

1. Introduction

The acquisition of past marking in Spanish for first language (L1) English speakers is complicated by the fact that Spanish morphologically marks the distinction between perfective past and imperfective past, whereas English marks these distinctions through the progressive tense or through the use of particles or adjuncts. Previous research on the second language (L2) acquisition of initial tense/aspect marking has been found to support the Aspect Hypothesis (AH) (Andersen 1991; Andersen and Shirai 1994), which maintains that past tense marking for L1 and L2 learners emerges based on prototypical associations with the aspectual classes of verbs. An alternative hypothesis is that learners of Spanish and other Romance languages initially, and possibly through later stages, use perfective past marking as a default tense marker instead of relying on inherent aspectual distinctions (the Default Past Tense Hypothesis [DPTH]) (Salaberry 1999, 2002, 2003, 2008; Salaberry and Ayoun 2005). Comajoan (2005) reviewed the results of both hypotheses for L2 classroom learners of Romance languages and suggested that task conditions seemed to be an important factor as to which studies support which hypothesis, although he did not analyze them. In addition to Comajoan, many researchers have cited the importance of several task variables in research on the acquisition of tense/aspect morphology: the elicitation of personal (first person) or impersonal (third person or fictitious) narratives (Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 319–21; Camps 2002; Salaberry 2003; Shirai 1997), the temporal focus of the tasks involved (Shirai 1997), and the task type and the task time allotted (Dominguez, Tracy-Ventura, Arche, Mitchell, and Myles 2013; Martelle 2011; Salaberry and Lopez-Ortega 1998; Shirai 2004).
The aim of this article is to review the results and task conditions of empirical studies with formal learners of L2 Spanish with L1 English that have shown that learners are marking aspect (the AH) or tense (the DPTH) first. This review has important empirical implications in that it will investigate the role of varying task methodology in accurately representing learners’ competence, as well as theoretical implications as to the emergence of tense/aspect morphology in classroom learners.

2. Background

One of the challenges L2 learners of Spanish must face is the encoding of reference to the past. Spanish marks past tense through two morphological markers—the preterite and imperfect—that differ by how they view the “internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie 1976: 3). The preterite encodes perfective aspect, which marks a situation viewed as ended, or bounded, while the imperfect encodes imperfective aspect, which is the idea of a situation in progress or viewed as ongoing (Andersen 1991). This system reflects a common aspectual distinction across languages, which is that of the perfective past and the imperfective past, marked respectively in Spanish by the preterite and the imperfect (Andersen 1991; Salaberry 2008: 45). The following examples, taken from Andersen (1991: 308–09), illustrate the difference between perfective and imperfective aspect:

(1) Preterite (perfective aspect):
Nadie bailó tan bien como él.
‘Nobody danced as well as he (did) in the dance contest we just saw.’

(2) Imperfect (imperfective aspect):
Nadie bailaba tan bien como él.
‘Nobody danced as well as he (did) when we were young.’

As seen in (1) and (2), English does not grammatically mark the difference in grammatical aspect between these two sentences; instead, additional information is needed in order to convey what is grammatically encoded in Spanish by the imperfect. This distinction illustrates one of the complications of acquiring the preterite/imperfect in L2 Spanish by L1 speakers of English.

2.1 The Aspect Hypothesis

Andersen’s (1991) pioneering study of the naturalistic acquisition of the preterite and imperfect in Spanish by L1 English adolescents in Puerto Rico found that learners first encode temporality based on the inherent lexical aspect of verbs and not on basic tense distinctions. Andersen based his hypothesis on the distinction between inherent, lexical aspect and grammatical aspect. Grammatical aspect, or viewpoint aspect, refers to a learner’s marking of aspect through grammatical morphology. Lexical aspect refers to the intrinsic properties of the predicate, which may or may not include internal or external arguments (Andersen 1991). While native speakers mark grammatical aspect, Andersen (1991) hypothesized that learners of Spanish initially mark lexical aspect before acquiring this native-like ability to mark grammatical aspect. Andersen used a four-way categorization of lexical aspect based on Vendler (1967). Bardovi-Harlig (2000) defined the four categories as the following:

1. States persist over time without change and no input of energy (have).
2. Activities involve a span of time with no inherent endpoint (sleep).
3. Accomplishments have an end point and inherent duration (build a house).
4. Achievements include the beginning and end point of an action (recognize). (215)
Achievements and accomplishments are distinguished by durativity; accomplishments involve inherent duration, while achievements do not. A further important distinction between the four categories is telicity: states and activities are atelic (with no endpoint to the action) while accomplishments and achievements have a definite endpoint (in other words, they are telic verbs). The telic verbs are often grouped together in tense/aspect research.

In the acquisition of Spanish, Andersen (1991) claimed that Spanish imperfect and preterite inflections are initially and through the beginning stages used to mark inherent lexical aspect; gradually, learners become able to mark grammatical aspect. Andersen found a consistent progression of perfective and imperfective marking in the acquisition of Spanish. Verbs were first marked with perfective past in achievement verbs, and the marking gradually spread to accomplishment, activity then state verbs. Imperfective past marking appeared later than perfective past marking, and spread from state verbs to activity, accomplishment then achievement verbs. Further research led to the development of the AH (Andersen and Shirai 1994). Shirai (2004) summarized the predictions of the AH (Andersen and Shirai 1996; Shirai 1991: 9–10):

1. Past marking first appears on achievement/accomplishment verbs, and is eventually extended to activity and stative verbs.
2. In languages that encode the perfective/imperfective distinction, imperfective past appears later than perfective past, and imperfective past marking begins with stative verbs, extending next to activity verbs, then to accomplishment verbs, and finally to achievement verbs.
3. In languages that have progressive aspect, progressive marking begins with activity verbs, and then extends to accomplishment and achievement verbs.
4. Progressive markings are not incorrectly overextended to stative verbs.

The first two predictions of the AH are the most relevant to L2 acquisition of Spanish and are the predictions that will be analyzed in this article. In the L2 acquisition of English, the AH has been supported by multiple single-level, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies in a variety of learner settings with a variety of L1s (see Shirai 2004 for a comprehensive review of English L2 studies). In addition, a variety of tasks have been used in studies supporting the AH, including oral interviews (Andersen 1991), cloze tasks (Collins 2002), and oral and written film retell tasks (Bardovi-Harlig 1998). As for the L2 acquisition of Spanish, the AH has been supported by a variety of classroom based and naturalistic setting studies with a variety of tasks (Camps 2002, 2005; Hasbún 1995; Lopez-Ortega 2000; Ramsay 1990).

2.2 The Default Past Tense Hypothesis (DPTH)

The DPTH makes the prediction that beginning learners initially rely on the use of the preterite to mark tense distinctions and not aspectual ones (Salaberry 1999, 2002, 2003, 2008; Salaberry and Ayoun 2005). This hypothesis is largely empirically based on L2 Spanish learners with L1 English, thus Salaberry suggests the reliance on the preterite tense is due to transfer of the English simple past tense to the L2 and the use of “general cognitive processes” (Salaberry 2008: 120). Salaberry (2005: 20) suggested that this distinction may be based on the idea that the perfective past is the unmarked linguistic form that learners may depend on before acquiring the marked imperfective form. That the preterite is the basic past tense marker is based on previous research that has claimed that the perfective is the more basic, or unmarked, member of the perfective-imperfective pair (Fleischman 1990: 54–55). Ayoun and Salaberry (2005: 280) hypothesize that learners initially are only able to mark tense, then gradually they become more sensitive to lexical aspect, then they begin to mark foreground/background distinctions.

Salaberry (1999) first proposed the DPTH based on a study with L2 university learners of Spanish. Other studies of classroom learners of Spanish have shown some support for the DPTH: Domínguez et al. (2013), Hasbún (1995), Lafford (1996, as cited by Salaberry 1999,
and studies with other target languages have also noted the presence of a default marker in the production of beginning learners, namely Dietrich, Klein, and Noyau (1995), Martelle (2011), and Wiberg (1996). Wiberg (1996) first proposed the idea of a default past tense marker from her research of bilingual Italian-Swedish adolescents in Italy. Martelle (2011) analyzed production of tense/aspect by L2 learners of Russian and found some support that beginner learners rely on the imperfective as a default marker. Learners marking tense before aspect has also been shown in research by the European Science Foundation Project, which investigated the L2 acquisition of English, Dutch, French, German, and Swedish (Dietrich et al., 1995: 270). Overall, Salaberry (2008: 246) noted that, while the empirical data does not unequivocally support the DPTH, enough evidence has accumulated for the use of a default marker of past tense that the DPTH should be further investigated for not just beginning learners, but also more advanced learners of varying L1s and L2s.

In sum, the principal difference between the DPTH and the AH is in their predictions for the initial patterning of the morphological markers. The initial tense/aspect marking for both the AH and the DPTH is predicted to be the preterite and not the imperfect. However, the AH predicts that this marking will be restricted to achievements and spread to accomplishments, then eventually to activities and lastly to states, while the DPTH predicts that preterite marking will emerge across all aspectual classes.

### 2.3 Task Variability in Tense/Aspect Research

Much second language acquisition (SLA) literature on task variability has been centered on the context of task-based language teaching (TBLT), from Robinson’s Cognition Hypothesis (2001, 2003, 2005), a theoretical perspective on task complexity and task design, including a task taxonomy that classifies task complexity and difficulty (Robinson and Gilabert 2007) to the relationship between task design and complexity, accuracy and fluency in task performance (Skehan 2009).

The latter has shown that task conditions, such as planning time before or during the task, can benefit at most two of the constructs: complexity, accuracy, or fluency, but rarely all three (Crookes 1989; R. Ellis 2009; Skehan 2009; Skehan and Foster 1997, 1999). The task conditions relevant to the kinds of narrative tasks used in this review of tense and aspect marking have found the following effects on complexity, accuracy and fluency as reviewed by Skehan (2009: 511): pre-task planning overall has been shown to aid complexity and fluency, while narrative tasks have shown greater complexity but less accuracy and fluency. While the AH and DPTH refer to developmental patterns and not accuracy, it is clear that task type and condition (e.g., the use of narratives), and planning time before or during the narrative, influences the nature of language produced by language learners. Developmental patterns are also influenced by task type, an issue which has been raised frequently in literature on tense and aspect acquisition.

Comajoan (2005) pointed out the importance of task variables in classroom research on tense/aspect acquisition in a review of studies on the AH and the DPTH with beginner oral story retell task data in L2 French, Spanish, and Catalan with L1 English. The following is a summary of his conclusions (Comajoan 2005: 41):

1. As for the AH, perfective morphology emerges in all aspectual classes, but telic categories are marked higher proportionally in the perfective past than atelic categories.
2. As for the DPTH, classroom learners may for a short time use the preterite as a default marker; however, this period of time may not be long enough to modify the learner’s interlanguage and disposition toward “prototypical associations of morphology and lexical aspect” (Comajoan 2005: 41).
3. Individual variability and task variety do play a factor and should be investigated more.
A comprehensive review focusing on the task conditions has yet to be done, but, as Comajoan (2005) concluded, deserves further study. Specific task variables that have been noted in previous literature to be important are the use of personal or impersonal narratives (Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 319–21; Camps 2002; Salaberry 2003; Shirai 1997), and the kind of task elicited (Domínguez et al. 2013; Martelle 2011; Shirai 2004).

The inclusion of personal or impersonal narrative tasks has often led to disparate results in tense/aspect research (Camps 2002; Salaberry 2003; Salaberry 2008: 108) given their discursive characteristics for both L1 and L2 speakers. In impersonal narratives such as film retell tasks, for example, participants seem to be less likely to recall background events; instead, they focus on retelling the sequence of events in the story, which they would likely consider the most important parts of the narrative (Camps 2002; Liskin-Gasparro 2000). Given that a sequence of events in a story retell task is related to the foreground, impersonal narratives may include mostly foreground with little background; personal narratives, though, may provide a context more conducive for inclusion of background (Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 320). As the imperfect is more associated with the background and with atelic events and the preterite with the foreground and telic events, it follows that personal or impersonal narratives may show different distributions of preterite and imperfect.

Other researchers have raised varied issues of task variability. Shirai (2004) reviewed studies in English L2 acquisition, and concluded that paper and pencil tests, or closed-ended tasks, tended to show support for the AH (Shirai 2004: 103). Shirai hypothesized that in paper and pencil tasks, learners can devote more attention to form as opposed to open-ended tasks. Martelle (2011) also found that the AH was supported more by tasks that elicited oral narratives or conversations, which took less time, and the DPTH was more supported in tasks with more planning time, such as written narratives. Domínguez et al. (2013) addressed task variation by analyzing preterite/imperfect marking and lexical aspect in a comprehension task and three oral elicitation tasks: a personal interview, an impersonal picture story retell, and an impersonal picture story retell eliciting non-prototypical combinations. Results showed that the beginning learners used preterite across all lexical categories, but showed a strong association of imperfect marking with states, even in the task with non-prototypical combinations, (e.g., where a foregrounded state would require the preterite).

As reviewed above, two distinct developmental paths for the acquisition of tense and aspect morphology have been proposed from empirical studies with classroom learners of L2 Spanish: learners have been shown to either mark tense (the DPTH) or aspect (the AH) initially. The goal of this current study is to analyze the data and task variables of studies that have supported either hypothesis. This current study consists of studies that have tested either hypothesis with beginning classroom learners of Spanish with L1 English given that this is the only population of learners for which multiple studies have shown support for either the DPTH or the AH. Furthermore, whether the data from these studies supports the DPTH or the AH has been disputed, therefore this review will address which hypothesis is supported as well as present a comparison of the task conditions of each study.

In sum, the goal of the present study is two-fold: to provide a comprehensive review of initial past tense marking and aspectual class as well as a review of task conditions of previous studies on the initial emergence of tense/aspect marking in order to reconcile the differing theoretical accounts of initial marking of tense/aspect for classroom learners of L2 Spanish. The following questions will be addressed:

1. Do results from previous studies with beginning learners of L2 Spanish with L1 English support the AH or the DPTH?
2. What are the task characteristics for the studies supporting the AH or the DPTH?
3. Do certain task characteristics point towards support for the AH or the DPTH?
3. The Present Review

This review focuses on the differing initial predictions of the DPTH and the AH: that beginning learners rely on a default marker of past tense (the DPTH) (i.e., the preterite), initially and not on lexical aspect, as predicted by the AH. Studies included in this review include those with data of preterite/imperfect marking by lexical aspect class from beginning classroom learners of Spanish with L1 English. Table 1 shows a summary of the eight studies, listed in chronological order, which fit those criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Study Design</th>
<th>Proficiency of lowest level(s) and n-size</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Support for AH or DPTH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramsay (1990)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Based on morphosyntactic profile (n = 6)</td>
<td>Oral narrative</td>
<td>AH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasbún (1995)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>First (n = 20) and Second year (n = 20)</td>
<td>Written retell</td>
<td>AH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaberry (1999)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional/Longitudinal</td>
<td>Second semester (n = 4)</td>
<td>Oral retell</td>
<td>DPTH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaberry (2003)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Second (n = 33) and fourth (n = 37) quarter</td>
<td>Written multiple choice</td>
<td>DPTH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camps (2005)</td>
<td>Longitudinal</td>
<td>First and second semester (n = 30)</td>
<td>Written narrative</td>
<td>AH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domínguez et al. (2013)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Year ten secondary school (n = 20)</td>
<td>Oral narrative and story retells</td>
<td>DPTH</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proficiency levels of the beginning participants in the studies are reported in Table 1, ranging from first- to third-semester university students. Tasks used across all studies have varied in modality, such as oral or written, as well as whether the task was open-ended or fill-in-the-blank.

Overall, four L2 Spanish studies by three different researchers have reported support for the AH (Camps 2002, 2005; Hasbún 1995; Ramsay 1990). On the other hand, three studies by the same researcher, Salaberry, have claimed support for the DPTH (Salaberry 1999, 2002, 2003). Domínguez et al. (2013) found preterite marking across all lexical classes consistent with the DPTH, but also a strong tendency to use imperfect with states. Details about the findings of each study will be discussed in the following sections: first, regarding the distribution of initial morphological marking and lexical aspect class, and second, details about the task utilized to elicit past forms will be compared.
3.1 Support for the AH or the DPTH

Support for the AH or the DPTH has been interpreted differently for several of the studies to be reviewed in this section, and therefore the goal of this section will be to review the results of each study in order to determine which hypothesis the data support. The following table summarizes the initial morphological marking that emerged, either preterite or imperfect, with all four lexical aspect classes—achievements, accomplishments, activities and states—at the lowest proficiency levels for the studies reviewed. Percentages in parentheses show how verbs of each lexical class (states, for example) pattern with which percentage of verbal morphology (the preterite or imperfect). Data from the lowest proficiency learners in the study are included, except for Hasbún (1995), whose results have been variably interpreted in the literature and will discussed here. As to be expected in emergent past morphology, many of the beginners still used present tense morphology to refer to the past. However, as the object of this study is to review the use of the imperfect and preterite markers, Table 2 shows only the percentages of this marking; the percentage of verbs marked with the present tense are not included. For example, the learners at level 2 in Ramsay (1990) marked 25.1% of achievements and accomplishments with the preterite, while none of the achievements and accomplishments were marked with the imperfect. Therefore, we can see that the rest of the achievements and accomplishments were marked by other morphological means, which in the majority of cases was the present tense.\(^2\) This analysis of aspectual class and verbal morphology is consistent with a within-category analysis, which looks at how many tokens of aspectual category receive past marking;\(^3\) all studies reviewed used this kind of analysis with the exception of Salaberry (1999) and Ramsay (1990). Salaberry’s (1999) data, however, have been reanalyzed as a within-category analysis as discussed by Bardovi-Harlig (2002). For Ramsay (1990), the raw data have been reanalyzed as a within-category analysis (Ramsay 1990: 236–40).

As shown in Table 2, the general pattern that emerges across the board is that learners mark all four lexical aspect classes with perfective marking. Between 15.1% and 92% of the telic verbs are marked with perfective morphology. Between 2.5% and 88.8% of atelic verbs are marked with perfective morphology. However, the most even distribution of perfective morphology is found in Salaberry’s 1999, 2002, and 2003 studies, where the preterite is used fairly equally across all four categories. An exception is the personal task in Salaberry (2003), in which perfective marking is concentrated with telic predicates. Domínguez et al. (2013) also shows a fairly equal distribution of preterite across all lexical aspect classes. Other studies—Ramsey (1990), Hasbún (1995)—show perfective marking to be higher in telic categories than in atelic categories.

Camps’s 2002 and 2005 studies show a high percentage of perfective marking across all classes. However, the participants in Camps (2005) at the time of composition 1 had only received instruction on the preterite; this is reflected in the fact that they produced preterite marking across all categories and no imperfect forms. In Camps (2002), accomplishments and achievements show a clear association with preterite marking; however, a large majority of states also show a strong association with the preterite, as pointed out by Salaberry (2008: 124). However, Camps (2002) also classified the target-like use, or accuracy rate, of the preterite and imperfect by verb class. Even though the AH and DPTH are based off of the distribution of grammatical marking with lexical aspect and not based on accuracy rates of past markers, it is worth noting the accuracy rates for the learners in Camps’s (2002) study. The target-like rate for the preterite with activities is 72.5% and for states 45.6% (Camps 2002: 194). Since the learners are accurate at using the preterite in a majority of contexts with activities, which is a non-prototypical case of marking, then it seems like these learners are not basing their marking on merely lexical aspect or tense; instead, they could have a developing sense of grammatical or viewpoint aspect.
The results of Hasbún’s level 1 learners do not clearly follow the pattern of other studies. Six level 1 learners in her study produced twenty-one preterite forms with four frequent verbs (*ser*, *tener*, *hablar*, *ir*) and one imperfect form with *estar* (Hasbún 1995: 134). Salaberry (1999, 2000) has interpreted Hasbún’s results as in favor of the DPTH because the level 1 learners did mark several statives with perfective marking. However, the preterite/imperfect forms were introduced for level 2 learners, not level 1, in her study. This fact is important because Hasbún’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Achievements</th>
<th>Accomplishments</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Statives</th>
<th>Tokens analyzed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ramsay (1990) 
Level 2 | preterite (25.1) imperfect (–) | preterite (15.8) imperfect (–) | preterite (0.9) imperfect (–) | 201 |
| Hasbún (1995) 
Level 1 | preterite (–) imperfect (–) | preterite (7.7) imperfect (–) | preterite (2.45) imperfect (–) | 499 |
| Level 2 | preterite (51.2) imperfect (2.3) | preterite (37.6) imperfect (2.8) | preterite (29.4) imperfect (5.9) | 444 |
| Salaberry (1999) 
Time 1 | preterite (30.0) imperfect (–) | preterite (55.0) imperfect (–) | preterite (20.0) imperfect (3.0) | 150 |
| Time 2 | preterite (53.5) imperfect (1.8) | preterite (23.8) imperfect (–) | preterite (29.0) imperfect (6.5) | 166 |
|  | preterite (56.0) imperfect (5.0) | preterite (71.0) imperfect (5.0) | preterite (69.0) imperfect (10.0) | 1208 |
| Salaberry (2002) | preterite (92.0) imperfect (8.0) | preterite (85.0) imperfect (15.0) | preterite (73.0) imperfect (27.0) | Not reported |
| Salaberry (2003) 
Impersonal task | preterite (67.0) imperfect (21.2) | preterite (65.9) imperfect (24.0) | preterite (50.3) imperfect (30.3) | 858 |
| Personal task | preterite (31.4) imperfect (41.7) | preterite (29.1) imperfect (46.1) | preterite (21.2) imperfect (46.1) | 696 |
| Camps (2005) 
Composition 1 | preterite (90.0) imperfect (–) | preterite (90.0) imperfect (–) | preterite (84.1) imperfect (–) | 470 |
| Composition 2 | preterite (83.9) imperfect (10.7) | preterite (67.7) imperfect (22.8) | preterite (39.1) imperfect (47.8) | 536 |
| Domínguez et. al. (2013) 
Personal interview | preterite (28.3) imperfect (13.4) | preterite (62.2) imperfect (7.7) | preterite (24.1) imperfect (19.6) | Not reported |
| Cat Story narrative | preterite (15.8) imperfect (3.4) | preterite (21.0) imperfect (1.8) | preterite (11.1) imperfect (9.2) | |
| Hermanas narrative | preterite (15.1) imperfect (3.0) | preterite (24.0) imperfect (2.6) | preterite (26.0) imperfect (16.2) | |
level 1 learners have been cited in tense/aspect studies as support for the DPTH (Salaberry 1999, 2000; Comajoan 2005), yet the fact that the level 1 learners had not yet been exposed to any past tense forms in their current class is often overlooked. Given that these level 1 learners had not yet had instruction on past morphology at that level, it is difficult to believe that the use of the preterite was anything but, as Hasbún states, memorized forms or formulaic chunks that learners may have learned through prior experience studying Spanish, although Hasbún does not explicitly report what prior experience with Spanish these participants had.

Overall, the DPTH is shown to be the most valid descriptor of initial perfective marking given that perfective marking was found across all lexical classes for virtually all of the beginning learners in the studies reviewed. However, depending on the study, a tendency for telic verbs to be proportionally higher marked with perfective marking did exist, which offers support for the AH. This result also echoes Comajoan’s (2005) results reviewing the DPTH and the AH in the acquisition of Romance languages. The exception to this were the studies by Salaberry (1999, 2002, 2003), in which perfective marking emerged in similar measures across all lexical aspect classes, which supports the DPTH.

Imperfective marking was found to emerge with mostly atelic predicates. Use of imperfect is low with telic predicates, ranging from 0 to 22.6%. However, between 0 and 51.9% of atelic predicates are marked with imperfective marking. These ranges indicate that imperfective marking is marked more in atelic categories, as shown in Camps (2002, 2005), Domínguez et al. (2013), Ramsey (1990), and in Salaberry’s (2003) personal task. Domínguez et al. (2013) in particular noted that lexical aspect class does play a role in beginning imperfective and perfective marking, however in the dimension of dynamic (event, or non-states) versus non-dynamic (non-events, or state) verbs rather than the four-way categorization of lexical aspect proposed in the AH. This characterization of lexical aspect (dynamic events versus non-dynamic events) is also supported by the data reviewed in Table 2: imperfect marking consistently is higher with state verbs than with other types of verbs even at these very beginning levels of proficiency. In the next section, a look at the characteristics of the tasks used in the studies reviewed to elicit past tense forms aims to investigate whether certain task characteristics influence when learners mark preterite evenly across all lexical aspect classes (i.e., the DPTH) or when preterite tends to cluster with telic predicates (i.e., the AH).

3.2 Analysis of Task Conditions

Table 3 summarizes the characteristics of the tasks used to elicit past forms in the studies reviewed.

As shown in Table 3, both oral and written tasks have been used in the studies reviewed, and both the AH and DPTH have been supported by both kinds of tasks. As for whether the task was time-constrained or self-paced, overall, the task time was controlled in some manner for most of the studies reviewed. Although Ramsey’s (1990) task was self-paced, she excluded from the results participants who took too long to complete the task that she deemed to be using their monitors because they “systematically” paused before verbs (Ramsay 1990: 276). She discusses the results of one subject who was excluded for that reason, and they show overuse of both the perfective and imperfective inflections. In Salaberry (1999), even though the task was self-paced, the students only saw the film once and had to communicate what they saw directly afterwards. This task was repeated with very similar results, as seen in Table 2. The next two categories in Table 3—personal or impersonal narratives and whether the task was open or closed-ended—reveal some important tendencies regarding the distribution of preterite/imperfect morphology.
3.2.1 Personal/Impersonal Narratives

Looking at results from the studies that used personal narratives, Camps (2002) and Salaberry (2003) show that learners are sensitive to the differing characteristics of each task. Camps (2002) analyzed five oral personal recorded narratives and found that his learners used the imperfect more frequently when the topic called for the use of the imperfect (for example, the habitual past narratives), whereas when the topic called for a recounting of a sequence of events, the imperfect was far less frequent. He discusses that this is because the learners would have had to be able to provide background information in order to incorporate the imperfect when recounting a sequence of events, and it appears that they were not able or inclined to do so (Camps 2002: 204). Salaberry (2003) conducted a study with one personal and one impersonal narrative multiple-choice task. For the impersonal task, learners used the preterite for more than 50% of all the contexts for each lexical aspectual category, which supports the DPTH. The imperfect was also used across all lexical aspectual categories, albeit in lower proportions than the preterite. However, for the personal narratives, the use of the imperfect with statives (46.1% imperfect versus 21.2% preterite) outnumbered the use of the preterite with atelic (46.1% imperfect versus 29.1% preterite) and with telic events (41.7% imperfect versus 31.4% preterite) (Salaberry 2003). He concluded that the imperfect could be used as a default in personal narratives. This result contrasts starkly with the overuse of the preterite in the same study with an impersonal narrative. However, a fundamental difference between personal and impersonal narratives is well represented in these tasks; the impersonal narrative had twice as many telic events as did the personal task; likewise, the personal task had twice as many stative events as the impersonal task. Moreover, as Salaberry (2003) noted, of the first ten verbs in the fictional narrative, eight would likely be marked with preterite, while in the personal narrative the first eight would be imperfect. That which Salaberry (2003) interprets as a default marker could be more of a priming effect since the first ten tokens of each narrative were biased towards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Oral or written</th>
<th>Time-constrained or self-paced</th>
<th>Open or Close Ended</th>
<th>Impersonal or personal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramsay (1990)</td>
<td>Oral</td>
<td>Self-paced</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaberry (2002)</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>10 min.</td>
<td>Fill in the blank</td>
<td>Impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaberry (2003)</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>6 min.</td>
<td>Multiple choice</td>
<td>Impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaberry (2003)</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>5 min.</td>
<td>Multiple choice</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domínguez et al. (2013)</td>
<td>Oral</td>
<td>Self-paced</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Personal/Impersonal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
either the preterite or the imperfect. At the same time, the learners show that they are sensitive
to aspect in that the selections they make are still biased towards the prototypical associations
based on lexical semantics and narrative type. In this sense, it does not seem like learners are
necessarily relying on a “default” marker; rather, they appear to be more sensitive to the kind
of narrative rather than explicitly marking tense. If they were only capable of marking tense at
this stage, then we should not see a difference in narrative type; clearly, the learners in this case
show a prototypical association based on lexical aspect and influenced by the discourse type.

A comparison of the use of preterite and imperfect in the personal interview versus the
impersonal (Cat Story and Hermanas) tasks in Domínguez et al. (2013) reflects some of
the tendencies observed in Camps (2002) and Salaberry (2003). While imperfect use never
outnumbers preterite use, it almost draws even with states (24.1% preterite, 19.6% imperfect)
in the personal interview and the Cat Story (11.1% preterite, 9.2% imperfect) and Hermanas
task (26.0% preterite, 18.2% imperfect). Another notable comparison is the higher use of the
imperfect in the personal interview with achievements (13.4%) compared to low use of imperfect
with achievements in the Cat Story (3.4%) and Hermanas narrative (3.0%), which reflects the
observation that personal narratives demonstrate less of a reliance on the preterite.

In conclusion, studies using personal (Camps 2002, 2005; Domínguez et al. 2013) narra-
tive tasks have showed a more delimited pairing of perfective/imperfective marking according
to lexical aspect and less of a reliance on preterite for all lexical classes. The DPTH has only
been supported by studies with impersonal narratives (Domínguez et al. 2013; Salaberry 1999,

3.2.2 Open- versus Closed-ended Tasks

The two studies, Salaberry (2002) and (2003), that used closed-ended tasks supported the
DPTH. These studies both used cloze tasks that required the learner either to fill in the blank
with the correct verb form of a given verb or to choose from one of four verbal inflections, both
of which call for an explicit focus on forms, or an intentional attention to linguistic form, versus
an incidental focus on form that can arise in a task focused on meaning (Doughty and Williams
1998; Long 1991). On the other hand, with the exception of Salaberry (1999), studies that have
used open-ended narrative tasks have supported the AH. All of the tasks in Camps’s studies
were open ended (e.g., “talk about what you did last weekend”). Moreover, the topics for the
narratives in Camps (2002, 2005) were conceptually very similar: all asked for the student to
recount what they did at a certain time in their lives. Ramsay’s (1990) task, like Camps (2002),
involved using pictures to tell a story. It was progressively more open-ended: participants,
as discussed previously, gradually had more control over the content of the story as the task
progressed. Hasbún’s (1995) task was a written retell of the Modern Times silent film, which
was the same film used in Salaberry (1999). However, the task in Salaberry (1999) was not a
straightforward retell; students were told that they were to be witnesses to the film they were
about to see, and they would have to tell what happened to another student, who in turn would
have to report that to the “chief of detectives,” who was a native or near-native speaker. In this
task, the second student relied only on the information and the linguistic input provided by the
first student in order to retell the story. Therefore, the output by the second student was likely
influenced by and limited to the input provided by the first student.

Overall, the greatest associations of perfective morphology with all lexical aspectual classes
were found in Salaberry’s (2002, 2003) studies; these were the only studies that used closed-
ended tasks. In open-ended tasks, learners showed a greater association of lexical aspect and
morphology in that telic verbs were marked higher with perfective morphology.
4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to review the results and task conditions of studies with beginning learners of Spanish that support the AH and the DPTH in order to see how the conditions have led towards either hypothesis. The results of the review show the beginning learners mark verbs of all four lexical aspect classes with perfective morphology, although certain task characteristics have led to closer associations of telic verbs with perfective morphology or associations of perfective morphology across the board. Namely, two factors were found to be important: the variance between impersonal versus personal narratives and type of task, whether closed or open-ended.

Regarding the difference between personal and impersonal narratives, learners’ dependence on the preterite has only been shown to occur in impersonal narratives, while learners show a distribution of grammatical marking related to lexical aspectual class in personal and impersonal narratives. This difference arises from the inherent characteristics of personal and impersonal narratives. First, personal narratives are not limited to a sequence of events; they can include reference to either past, present or future events (Noyau 1990), which allows for a variety of temporal references to be produced. In personal narratives then, learners need to distinguish between events told in a sequence and events serving to establish the background. The fact that all the studies that used personal narratives (Camps 2002, 2005; Domínguez et al. 2013; Salaberry 2003) showed higher use of imperfect than in other studies supports this fact: learners are indeed introducing more imperfect into their production in response to the requirements of the discourse. That the personal narratives lined up with the AH rather than the DPTH shows that when the context and need for the imperfect and the preterite exist at the same time, learners use grammatical markers in accordance with aspectual class. This is in contrast to studies that have used impersonal narratives (e.g., film retell tasks) that require temporally ordered events that involve a clear relation between each other (Noyau 1990). In this sense, the preterite is the prototypical form to use for a series of sequenced events; therefore, the association with the preterite across all lexical aspectual classes in the impersonal narratives in Salaberry’s studies (1999, 2002, 2003) may reflect the discourse requirements of this type of narrative. At the same time, some impersonal narratives do show support for the AH (e.g., Camps 2005; Hasbún 1995; Ramsay 1990). One potential explanation is that the picture prompts used in Ramsay (1990) and Camps (2005) may have encouraged the participants to include background information by virtue that they could see it in the pictures. Shirai (1997) also hypothesized that Ramsay’s (1990) study showed support for the AH because she excluded monitor over-users, while in Salaberry’s 1999 study, the high cognitive demands of the task led to learners using their monitors, or conscious knowledge, to produce “what they thought was the equivalent of the English past tense” (Shirai 1997: 7). As for Hasbún (1995), the fact that the participants saw the silent film twice and had 40 minutes to elaborate a written retell may have given them the chance to pay attention to more of the details and thus provide a more elaborate story with foregrounded and backgrounded events.

As for the difference between open and closed-ended tasks, while the AH is widely supported across many tasks in other L1/L2 combinations, in this review the only support comes from open-ended tasks for the beginning learners. In contrast, studies that used closed-ended tasks that elicited a close attention to form showed results consistent with the DPTH. This difference between task types shows that the results of closed-ended tasks do not line up with the AH for beginning learners in L2 Spanish, as Shirai had concluded for studies in L2 English (Shirai 2004); in fact, the results of closed-ended tasks line up with the DPTH for these beginning learners (Salaberry 2002, 2003). Closed-ended tasks demand that learners focus on forms explicitly; that is to say, learners have to choose the correct morphology. For example: “ayer una mujer joven y bonita (camina/caminó/caminaba/caminar). . .” (Salaberry 2003: 572). On the other hand, open-ended tasks, such as the narratives used in the studies reviewed, require a focus on a wide range of characteristics beyond morphology, including narrative cohesion,
content and vocabulary. In other words, the learners’ attention while telling or writing a narrative is diverted in many different directions, while in the closed-ended tasks reviewed in this study, a learner’s performance is limited to producing the correct form for each blank. In closed-ended tasks with pure focus on forms, learners appear to be using the preterite as a default marker in order to express that the action is happening in the past.

Another important aspect to the debate over the emergence of tense/aspect is the role of explicit instruction and the distribution of input at the beginning stages on a learner’s production. As Comajoan (2005) noted, the preterite is typically taught before the imperfect in most textbooks of L2 Spanish, therefore classroom learners spend a period of time relying only on the preterite to refer to past events. Thus, it is not surprising that the DPTH has found learners to rely only on the preterite at the early stages of tense/aspect acquisition. Furthermore, that learners may mark tense with a default marker is not limited to L2 Spanish or to the preterite marker itself. Martelle (2011) found that L2 Russian learners tend to use the imperfective as a default marker in the beginning stages of acquisition; unlike in L2 Spanish acquisition where the preterite is taught first, in Russian, the imperfective is typically first taught followed by the perfective, which strengthens the case that initial morphological marking is largely influenced by biases present in the input. It remains a question for future research whether variation in the order of presentation of the preterite and imperfect (e.g., presenting both together) influences the interlanguage rules that learners form.

5. Conclusions

In sum, learners go through a stage of marking preterite regardless of lexical aspect. This trend has been most strongly represented in tasks requiring a focus on forms or in impersonal narratives, (e.g., Salaberry 2002 and 2003). On the other hand, beginning learners show more prototypical associations of preterite marking with telic predicates in open-ended tasks or personal narratives. As for imperfect marking, as noted by Domínguez et al. (2013), a greater association seems to exist at the beginning levels with imperfect and state verbs.

Future studies on the DPTH and the AH should involve a variety of task types, including personal and impersonal narratives and closed- and open-ended tasks. Regarding exposure to the target language, an important area for future classroom research is to modify the instructional sequence of the preterite and imperfect. If we teach learners from the initial exposure to the past tense that there are two possibilities to mark past tense in Spanish, the short-term tendency to use the preterite would likely disappear or dissipate. On the other hand, if such a teaching attempt shows no difference in the overuse of the preterite, then the DPTH would be further justified.

Future research might elicit a conversational interview with varying temporal reference as suggested by Shirai (1997). This would allow for more verbal forms to emerge and surpass some of the limitations of personal/impersonal narratives and elicited narratives by virtue of being a conversational narrative. Addressing the distributional bias of the classroom input—including teacher talk and the textbook—is also important to see the distribution of preterite/imperfect morphology and lexical aspect in the input compared to student output.

In conclusion, this review has shown that beginning classroom learners of L2 Spanish with L1 English are consistently capable of producing more than a default past tense under certain conditions. They tend to make aspectual distinctions when narrating personal tasks or when allowed a free topic. On the other hand, when focused on forms in a closed-ended task, the production tends toward a preference for the preterite tense. In addition, the DPTH is restricted to predictions based on classroom learners, which is why this discrepancy has emerged in L2 acquisition of tense/aspect in Spanish, while L2 English studies have been based on either classroom or naturalistic learners. As seen in this review, the conditions by which past forms are elicited for these classroom learners may result in a limited picture of a learner’s understanding of past tense morphology and aspectual class. In order to understand the order and nature of
acquisition of past tense morphology, especially at the beginning levels of study, future studies must implement a variety of tasks consistently in order to reveal what learners are capable of producing as well as take into consideration the input learners are exposed to in the classroom.

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NOTES

1 More studies have been conducted on the acquisition of L2 Spanish past morphology, but are not eligible for inclusion in this review if they did not analyze lexical aspect. See Comajoan (2005) and Salaberry (2005) for a comprehensive review of L2 learners of Romance languages and Salaberry (2008: 143–62) for a review of all studies with L2 Spanish.

2 The studies reviewed varied as to how they classified other morphology used; however, in all studies the three most common verbal forms are the present, preterite, and imperfect.

3 This analysis allows for a general picture of where each morphological marker emerges and with which aspectual class. For the purposes of the present review, raw numbers are not provided; however, given that the number of participants varied for each study, it should be noted that the amount of data per study varies accordingly.


WORKS CITED


