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Context-Focused Grammar Teaching: A Comparison between English Present Perfect and Past Tenses and Affects on Korean English Learning

Seunghwei (Ellie) Lee

Abstract

Despite massive amounts of time Korean English Learners (KLL) study English grammar, they continue to have problems becoming proficient in verb tenses, especially the present perfect. This study examines this problem through a linguistic comparative analysis of Korean and English present perfect and past tenses. Two possible reasons for KLL difficulty with verb tenses could be mode of instruction and L1 interference.

Key words: Korean English Learners, English as a Foreign Language, EFL teaching, contrastive analysis

Introduction

Korean students start learning English in elementary school. They continue learning English through high school and in most cases, even after they get a job. We say learning English is a life-long journey in Korea. By the time Koreans graduate from the university, they will have studied English for over ten years. However, their proficiency in English does not reflect the amount of time they spend learning. This difficulty is even manifested in the writing of a high proficiency English major at Auburn University (Sabino, 2011). According to Kang (2003),

“in spite of the enormous amount of English grammar input during English classes, when Korean English learners learn English, they face huge difficulties with English tenses, especially the present perfect tense” (p. 23).

Recently, the Korean Education Department (KED) announced imposing “Immersing English Education” in elementary schools, where teachers have to teach English in English and focus on a communicative English education covering all four domain areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening. However in my experience, there are not sufficient resources for teachers to do this “Immersion English Education.” Teachers generally still follow a traditional approach – drilled grammar lessons.

I have taught Korean English Language Learners (KELLS) for about ten years and have noticed that even at an advanced level of study, learners who are almost fluent in speaking, writing, reading, and listening in English still experience difficulties using and distinguishing between the English past and present tenses. There are two possible causes: 1) complexity of the structure and 2) L1 interference. While I was teaching English, I asked my students why it was so hard for them to comprehend the English present perfect. One of my student’s answers was very shocking. He believed that there is no present perfect tense in Korean. Others believed that the discrepancies between the English present perfect and past tenses

are very similar to the differences between Korean present perfect and past tenses. In contrast, some applied linguists argue that this difficulty emerges mainly because of negative L1 interference. In this study I will compare the English and Korean past and present perfect tenses. I then analyze questionnaire data to see if the differences predict KELLS' responses.

Background of the Study

English Past and Present Perfect Tenses

There have been a number of studies of both the English past and present perfect tenses. Leech (1971) observed that "the past tense usually used in reference to some definite time in the past that took place before the present moment and excludes the present" (p. 276). Similarly, Huddleston (1984) indicated that the past tense does not include the present, thus it can be referred to as the "exclusive past" (p. 158). The past tense is also often used with time adverbials indicating a definite past time, e. g., *yesterday, last week, two years ago*. According to Kang (2003), the "English present perfect form denotes a situation leading up to the present as a consequence of a past event or state" (p. 33). Past tense signals remoteness from the speaker's current position as in example 1a. In contrast, in sentence 1b, the speaker's interest is the point of finishing her study related to the present moment. That is, the speaker might be continuing to study. Hence, the speaker selects the present perfect tense.

1a. She studied English.

1b. She has studied English for two years.

According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1972), "The present perfect indicates a period of time stretching backwards into some earlier time. It is past with current relevance" (p. 91). Comrie (1976) clarifies this further by identifying four types of present perfect: *continuance, experience, habit, and result*.

The *Continuance Present Perfect* can be used with a state which began in the past and continues up to the present time; the state also can continue into the future. An adverb of duration such as, *yet, since, so far, up to now* is usually required for this use. For instance, in sentence 1b above contains the adverbial phrase *for ten years*.

The *Habit Present Perfect* can be used with a habit in a period of time from the past to the present as in example 2. In this use, the exact time is similarly considered unnecessary or irrelevant by the speaker.

2. I have lived in England for four years.

The *Experience Present Perfect* can also be used to encode indefinite past experience at a time between the present, the experience present perfect is used when the speaker considers specifying the exact time unnecessary as in example 3.

3. *Have you ever been to New York?*

The *Result Present Perfect* is used for a past event with a present relevance. To this Huddleston (1984) added that the use of the present perfect tense is required with certain time adverbials such as, *just, since last week, so far, yet, etc.* as in example 4.

4. Mia *has just broken* the window.

The above four types of present perfect have one thing in common: present relevance. In 1b, the person is still studying English. Example sentence 2 indicates the speaker still lives in English. In example sentence 3, present relevance is signaled by *ever* which means until the present. In the last example sentence “the broken window” is a result of a recent act as signaled by *just*.

Korean Past and Present Perfect Tenses

Korean has both past and present perfect tenses. However, the Korean present perfect is not equivalent to the present perfect in English. As Kang (2003) states, the Korean present perfect implies a continuation of a state resulting from the completion of a past action [as in English]. However, the perfect in English and Korean are not analogous because the perfect in English contains a wider range of functions than any Korean perfect equivalent (p. 33).

According to Suh (2005), the Korean past tense means that the action has been completed as in the case of the English present perfect, but both the past and the present perfect share the same suffix '-et' (었). Historically, for most verbs the present perfect suffix, '-issta' (있었다), was replaced past tense '-et' (었). The discrepancy between the Korean past and present perfect is that the past tense cannot be used if the event might continue in the future (p. 43). If an event is completed, and it has present relevance, the past tense is widely used in Korean. This is not the case in English. As a result, the Korean present perfect is limited to intransitive verbs such as, 가다 gada 'go', 오다 oda 'come', 도착하다 dochakhada 'arrive', 서다 seoda 'stand', 앉다 antta 'sit', 눕다 nuptta 'lie down', 익다 iktta 'ripe', etc. It is also used with some stative verbs 비다 bida 'be empty', 있다 isstta 'be' and passive verbs 버려지다 burryujida 'thrown away', 발표되다 balpyodaeda 'presented', 주어지다 juyujida 'given' (Kim, 2007).

Below are the comparisons of the four types of English present perfect to their Korean counterparts. Abbreviations appear in Appendix A.

The Continuance Present perfect

1a. Ellie has studi-ed for ten years.

1b. 엘리 는 십 년 동안 공부 를 해 왔었 다.
 Ellie -nen sip nyeon dongan gongbu -reul hae -waiss -da.
 Ellie -NOM ten years for study -ACC do PPERF-DECL

The Habit Present perfect

2a. I have live-d in England for four years.

2b. 나 는 영국 에서 사 년 동안 살 았었 다.
 Na -nen Youngkuk -eseo sa nyeon dongan sal -waiss -da.
 I -NOM England -ACC four years for live PRERF -DECL

The Experience Present perfect

3a. Have you ever be-en to Insadong?

3b. *너 인사동 -에 가 본적 있니?
 *Neo Insadong -e ga bonjeok -issni?
 *You Insadong -ACC go PPERF -QUES

The Result Present perfect

4a. Mia has broke-n the window.

4b. *미아 가 창문 을 깬 었었 다.
 *Mia -ga changmoon -eul kkae isst da.
 *Mia -Nom window -ACC break

Note: In sentence 1b, 2b, and 3b declarative morpheme ‘-ta’ is used to indicate that the sentences are declarative statement. In sentence 3b, the interrogative morpheme ‘-ni’ is used.

As Kang (2003) writes, “in Korean, sometimes the present perfect is available, and sometimes it is not depending on the main verb” (p. 35). For example, in 1b and 2b, the present perfect tense is available because they are intransitive verbs; however, in 3b the present perfect is ungrammatical. There is no equivalent to the English word “be.” In Korean, therefore, there is no equivalent to English “been”. Additionally, even though the present perfect is available in 1b and 2b, substituting the past tense is more acceptable in Korean. Similarly, in sentence 4b using present perfect sounds awkward because the main verb is not intransitive. These relationships are illustrated in table below.

Table 1. Comparison between Comrie’s four kinds of present perfect with Korean.

	Present Perfect	
	English	Korean
Continuance	Have...t, d, ed, en, n	Iss, waiss, suiss, baiss, maiss, gaiss, naiss
Habit	Have...t, d, ed, en, n	Iss, waiss, suiss, baiss, maiss, gaiss, naiss
Experience	Have...t, d, ed, en, n	Ungrammatical
Result	Have...t, d, ed, en, n	Iss, waiss, suiss, baiss, maiss, gaiss, naiss

As the table illustrates, in English there are five discontinuous present perfect allomorphs: have...t~d~ed~en~n. For example, *has caught*, *has baked*, *has prodded*, *has taken*, and *has broken*. Korean has seven allomorphs indicating the present

perfect tense. The base form is {-iss}. However, depending on the main verb, we need to add [wa], [su], [ba], [ma],[ga], and [na]. In the examples 1c and 1d above, the main verb for 'do' and 'live' require the extra [wa] to link the sound between the main verb and the present perfect morpheme.

Having analyzed both Korean and English past and the present perfect tense, I realized that these differences may have implications for KELLS. However, how we teach English may also contribute to the problem. The next section of this paper describes a series of experiments that I designed to test these hypotheses.

Method

A study was designed to reveal KELLS' understanding of English past tense and present perfect tense. Three groups of participants' responses to a questionnaire and individual follow-up interviews were compared to determine how well Korean ESL students could differentiate usages between the past tense and present perfect tense in English.

Participants

There were three groups of participants. The first group consisted of seven male and three female Korean ESL students aged between 22 and 27 studying in Intensive English Program at southern comprehensive university. The second group was composed of five male and five female Korean ESL high school students aged between 16 and 18 studying at a southern high school. The third group was composed of five native English speakers aged between 22 and 27 majoring in Language Arts Education in a Master's program at southern comprehensive university. The first group of participants had studied English for more than ten years and most had experienced English instruction using prescriptive grammar substitution drills. The second group of participants also had studied English more than ten years. Additionally, they all had lived in the United States more than two years. In contrast to the first group, the second group studied descriptive English grammar when they were in Korea, and their English classes were more focused on the communicative approach than on grammar itself. The participants in the last group were native speakers of English taking a Grammar Methods course at southern comprehensive university.

Task & Instruments

Two grammar exercises were prepared in which the participants had to distinguish between the past tense and the present perfect tense in English. There were a total of 25 questions. (See Appendix B). After members of the first and the third group completed the exercises, I met with each participant individually to discuss their responses. I emailed the exercises to the participants in the second group since I was not able to congregate them at the same time in the same location.

After receiving their responses to the questionnaires, I emailed them asking them to explain their choices. Thus, I acknowledge that the data presented are selective and partial.

Results

Group three, the native speakers, provided a base line. They agreed on all questions but Question 5Ⓚ. Because native speakers disagreed on this question, it is eliminated from the analysis. For questions 1Ⓛ, 2Ⓧ, 3Ⓢ, 4Ⓚ, 6Ⓝ, and Ⓟ, all KELLs agreed with the native speakers' responses. Therefore, these questions are not considered further. On the remaining questions, group two significantly outperformed group one (p<.0001). However only question 3Ⓢ (significant at p<.02), was differentiated between the two groups. QⓅ was nearly significant at p<.06. The responses of these items are displayed in the table 2 below. Notice that although QⓅ and Ⓧ were not significantly differentiated between two groups, the direction of the responses was similar to that of Q3Ⓢ. In both cases, the pattern of responses is in the opposite direction. For Q3Ⓢ, the group two patterned was similar to that of the native speaker group. However, for QⓅ, it was group one who were more similar to native speakers of English.

Table 2. Present Perfect Tense vs. Past Tense Questions and Participants' Responses

Item	Group 1		Group 2	
	Past N	Present perfect N	Past N	Present perfect N
Q3. Somebody Ⓢ (stole/has stolen) my bicycle! My dad Ⓢ (has given/gave) it to me on my last birthday. I only Ⓢ (rode/have ridden) it twice! Now, I will have to walk home.	3	7	<u>9</u>	1
However, when a Toronto woman Ⓟ(become) Sick last year, her doctor Ⓟ (discover) that she Ⓧ (never travel) abroad in her life.	1	<u>9</u>	6	4

Discussion

When KELLs learn English, they often try to directly translate Korean sentences into English and vice-versa. That is why they tend to make past tense sentences rather than a correct present perfect tense in translation since most of the English present perfect sentences can be expressed by past tense in Korean, unless there is a clear clue like time adverbs. The big difference between Korean past and present perfect is that the Korean past tense cannot be used if the event still continues in the present or in the future. In other words, the action must have been completed and may not continue. It is necessary to teach students the differences between the English past and the present perfect because they are different from the

Korean past and present perfect. Korean students of English are not able to immediately identify problems with the past and the present perfect aspect. Since they cannot easily tell the differences between the English and Korean tense and aspect patterns, it causes learners to avoid using them.

But can we solely blame this on the lack of equivalent form in the first language and the target language? Apparently, the data suggest that teaching in grammar isolation both benefits and limits Korean ESL Learners. Since they learn English through grammar drilling using grammar books, they tend to do well on tests, but they are not able to apply the structure in a real situation contexts. However, the students from the second group who have been exposed to English through English were able to use and distinguish between the past and the present perfect better than the first group whose main objective of English class was based on the grammar lessons. My data clearly shows the negative aspects of teaching grammar in isolation without teaching them how to apply and use them. Students were able to answer questions according to the grammar rules they had learned in school, but they focus less about the flow of the sentences, so they could not answer the questions which had both the past and present perfect tense in the same sentence

Conclusion

I have drawn two conclusions from my analysis: the first, consistent with my prediction, is that the groups performed differently. The difference in their performance was highly significant, with group one, who learned with grammar drills, performing less like native speakers than group two, who were taught with a communicative approach. However, it cannot be determined from the data gathered for this study whether this is due to instructional differences or to group two's residence in the United States. The second conclusion that must be drawn is that the differences in the English and Korean present perfect described in the previous sections were not predictive of learners' choices. This does not, however, mean that considering the differences in the two tense systems is not useful. Further study may reveal that drawing student's attention to the differences revealed in table 1 enhances their learning.

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Appendix A

Part I. Choose the right tenses.

1. Jane Ⓐ (lived/has lived) in Tokyo for five years, but she Ⓑ (left/has left) in 2003.
2. The Titanic Ⓒ (sank/has sunk) in 1912. I love the movie Titanic. I Ⓓ (saw/have seen) the movie three times. The last time I Ⓔ (saw/have seen) it, I Ⓕ (was/have been) with my friends. I am going to see it again tonight with my family.
3. Somebody Ⓖ (stole/has stolen) my bicycle! My dad Ⓗ (gave/has given) it to me on my last birthday, and I only Ⓘ (rode/have ridden) it twice! Now, I will have to walk home.
4. On the other hand, my brother still has his bicycle. He Ⓙ (fell/has fallen) off his bike three times this month. He Ⓚ (went/has gone) to the hospital two weeks ago.
5. Hana Ⓛ (studied/has studied) in America for 8 months.
6. I am a teacher. I Ⓜ (walked/have walked) to school every day for the last six weeks! Finally, my friend Ⓝ (sold/has sold) her car to me last night, so I don't have to walk to school anymore.
7. Ouch! I Ⓟ (cut/have cut) my finger!
8. I Ⓠ (lost/have lost) eight pounds since last month. I Ⓡ (exercised/have exercised) last night for 3 hours.

KORESN ELS AND ENGLISH VERB TENSES

Part II. Read the short passage and complete the paragraph using the past tense or the present perfect tense.

Have you ever had malaria? If you have, the chances are that you ① (get) _____ the disease in a hot country. Malaria is most common in tropical countries, especially those with wet and humid climates, where the mosquitoes which carry the disease can flourish. However, recently, malaria ② (become) _____ more common in Canada. According to a recent report, over 1,000 people ③ (contract) _____ the disease in Canada in 1997, and the number ④ (rise) _____ every year since 1994. This is an alarming trend. Why is the incidence of malaria rising here? The answer is travel. More and more Canadians travel abroad every year, and some of them catch malaria. However, when a Toronto woman ⑤ (become) _____ sick last year, her doctor ⑥ (discover) _____ that she ⑦ (never travel) _____ abroad in her life. She must have been bitten by a mosquito which ⑧ (get) _____ the disease from another sick Canadian.

Appendix B

Task	Group 1 (N = 10)		Group 2 (N = 10)		Group 3 (N = 5)	
	Past N (%)	Present perfect N (%)	Past N (%)	Present perfect N (%)	Past N (%)	Present perfect N (%)
Q1a	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)		5(100%)
Q1b	10(100%)			10 (100%)	5(100%)	
Q2c	5(50%)	5(50%)	2(20%)	8(80%)		5(100%)
Q2d	5(50%)	5(50%)	2(20%)	8(80%)		5(100%)
Q2e	10(100%)		10 (100%)		5(100%)	
Q2f	5(50%)	5(50%)	5(50%)	5(50%)	5(100%)	
Q3g	9 (90%)	1(10%)	10(100%)			5(100%)
Q3h	10(100%)		9(90%)	1(10%)		5(100%)
Q3i	3(30%)	7(70%)	1(10%)	9(90%)	5(100%)	
Q4j	2(20%)	8(80%)	10 (100%)			5(100%)
Q4k	10 (10%)	9(90%)		10(100%)	5(100%)	
Q5l	2 (20%)	8(80%)	4 (40%)	6(60%)	5(100%)	
Q6m	5(50%)	5(50%)	10(100%)			5(100%)
Q6n	10 (10%)		2(20%)	8(80%)	5(100%)	
Q7o	3(30%)	7(70%)		10(100%)	2(40%)	3(60%)
Q8p	1(10%)	9(90%)	10(100%)			5(100%)
Q8q	9(90%)	1(10%)	2(20%)	8(80%)	5(100%)	
①	5(50%)	5(50%)		10(100%)		5(100%)
②	3(30%)	7(70%)		10(100%)		5(100%)
③	2(20%)	8(80%)		10(100%)		5(100%)
④	3(30%)	7(70%)		10(100%)		5(100%)
⑤	10(100%)		10(100%)		5(100%)	
⑥	1(10%)	9(90%)	6(60%)	4(40%)		5(100%)
⑦	4(40%)	6(60%)	2(20%)	8(80%)		5(100%)
⑧	5(50%)	5(50%)	2(20%)	8(80%)		5(100%)