

The 'tense' issue

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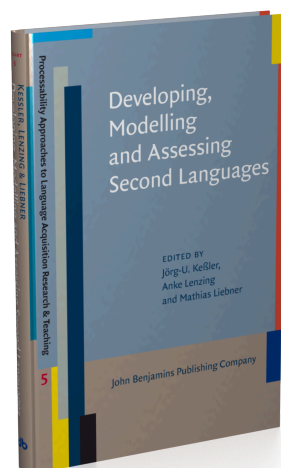
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Variable past tense marking by advanced end-state Chinese speakers of L2 English

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Chinese learners of L2 English tend to show variable past tense *-ed* marking even at an advanced proficiency level. The source of this problem has been explored and debated extensively but no conclusion has been reached (see Beck 1997; Lardiere 1998a/b; Hawkins & Liszka 2003). In this study we continue the investigation by testing two hypotheses: (a) the variable past tense marking is a reflection of the training learners have received during their university study, and (b) rigorous training discourages the ‘bad choices’ being made. Through examining the L2 English speeches of 9 advanced end-state L1 Chinese speakers who had learned English in either top-notch or non-top-notch programmes in china, we found that rigorous training programmes did indeed lead to a high level of ultimate attainment in the past-marking albeit not at the native-like level. It also inhibits ‘bad choices,’ ensuring a uniform high rate of L2 English morphological marking.

1. Introduction

“Tense has the reputation of being the most tortuous of grammar... Though native speakers of English use its tense system effortlessly, it often bewilders people who learn it as adults.”

(S. Pinker. *The Stuff of Thought*. 2007: 193; 197)

The variable marking of the past tense *-ed* by L2 learners of Chinese background has intrigued SLA scholars for a long time. A number of studies found that even near-native speakers of this L1 group marked past tense on regular verbs variably, either at a rate far below the criterial level¹ (Lardiere 1998a), or below the

1. The criterial level is not a constant. In SLA, it is usually based on accuracy to assess mastery. Different researchers set different criterial targets, usually above average, for example, 60% in Vainikka & Young-Scholten (1994), 70% in Eubank & Grace (1998). Pienemann (1998) proposes the ‘emergence criterion’ to assess language acquisition. For details, see Pienemann (1998) and Pallotti (2007).

rate of suppliance by similar L2 English learners of L1 German and L1 Japanese backgrounds (Hawkins & Liszka 2003). From the perspective of Processability Theory (Pienemann 1998), the past *-ed* sits at Stage 2 of the 6-stage developmental hierarchy for English morphology. While all the Chinese subjects in these studies demonstrated their skill to process this morpheme as measured by the emergence criterion, they fell short of a high level of mastery as measured by the accuracy criterion when compared to the German and Japanese subjects. The question is: what might be the possible reasons or sources for this marking variability?

Beck (1997) carried out a series of experiments to test the L2 inflection-attachment system, i.e., the ability to generate inflectional forms and attach them to the stems of regular verbs. The results showed that Chinese L2 learners of English (at the proficiency level of minimum TOEFL530) did have the morphological knowledge of regular English past tense inflection, and that their L2 competence did not involve inflection-attachment 'deficit' (see also Hawkins & Liszka 2003; Prévost & White 2000). Beck hypothesized that the L2 'impairment' might be in the domain of syntax.

However, Lardiere's (1998a/b) case study of an end-state L2 speaker of English (Patty²) provides evidence contrary to Beck's hypothesis. Although Patty's past tense marking was consistently low (34% overall and 5.80% on regular verbs) (Lardiere 1998a: 16; 2003: 184),³ she did not seem to have problems with syntax as attested by her correct production of English negation, adverb placement, pronominal case marking and a variety of CP clauses. This led Lardiere to conclude that the 'deficit' shown in her past tense marking was domain-specific, i.e., it was confined within morphology, with no connection to her L2 syntax (1998a/b, 2000, also see Eubank & Grace 1998).

If variability in the L2 past tense morphology displayed by advanced L2 English speakers of Chinese background is not due to their morphological knowledge, nor to their underlying syntactic competence, is it possible that the source of the problem comes from L1 phonotactic constraints? Since Mandarin Chinese syllable structure permits only alveolar and velar nasals in the coda position, it is likely that the phonetic realization of the past marker *-ed* [t/d] is compromised in speech production. If that were true, similar effects would be observed in the

2. Unlike Hawkins and Liszka's (2003) informants and the informants in the current study, it is not clear if or how Patty's general English proficiency was assessed. Living, studying and working in an English speaking country for many years is not a guarantee for high English proficiency.

3. Patty's agreement marking on nonpast 3sg thematic main verbs (e.g., *He works everyday*) was even lower, less than 5% in the second and the third recordings (Lardiere, 1998b: 366).

English past participles of regular verbs (*have jumped*) as well as words ending in consonants other than alveolar and velar nasals (*cat*, *desk*). Evidence from Hawkins and Liszka (2003) showed perfect production by their Chinese subjects of past participle endings (100%) and a high rate of word-final [t/d] in monomorphemic words (82%). Similarly, Hansen's (2001) study of the speech samples of three Chinese informants (TOEFL590-617) found a variety of words with single, two-member and three-member coda in two data sets over a five-month period, many of which contained [t/d].⁴ Obviously, L1 Chinese syllable structure cannot be the source of variable marking of English simple past tense.⁵

From a parametric perspective, Hawkins (2000) and Hawkins and Liszka (2003) observed that in Chinese, the parametric feature [\pm past] is not selected by Chinese language. Indeed, unlike English, German and Japanese, Mandarin Chinese has no grammaticalized tense. It does not use verb affixes to signal the relationship between 'the time of the occurrence of the situation and the time that situation is brought up in speech' (Li & Thompson 1981:184). The concept of 'past' is not marked morphologically, but expressed through lexical means and pragmatic contexts. Hawkins and Liszka (2003:36) claimed that this L1 feature is subject to the maturational constraint and 'will not be accessible in later L2 acquisition.' Evidence for this claim came from their study in which they compared the L2 English past tense marking by advanced end-state L2 English learners of Chinese (2), Japanese (5) and German (5) backgrounds who were Masters students at a university in UK. The results from an oral production task showed that the Chinese informants supplied the past tense marker at a much lower rate (62.5%) than their Japanese (91.9%) and German (96.3%) informants although all three groups were similar in a written test.⁶ While these results were consistent with Beck's (1997) conclusion that there was no deficit in the L2 morphological

4. Patty, on the other hand, showed a deletion rate of over 97% for monomorphemic words ending in [t/d], which is consistent with her non-production of past tense -ed in the past context (Lardiere 2003:180). Patty had a complex linguistic background. Considering that one of her L1s is Cantonese, a dialect of Chinese that allows the coda to be nasal stops as well as corresponding but unreleased bilabial, alveolar and velar stops [b, d, g] (Deng 1992), it is possible that Patty produced the past -ed at a rate higher than 5.80% but the production was not 'heard' because it was phonetically unreleased.

5. Incidentally, the Japanese syllable structure does not permit a consonantal coda either. Yet the simple past tense marking by Japanese-English learners was not compromised according to Hawkins and Liszka (2003).

6. The informants were international postgraduate students in the Masters programs of various academic disciplines at the University of Essex. The two Chinese informants' undergraduate major at their Chinese universities was unknown (Hawkins p.c. 2010).

component, the comparatively 'low' level of past tense marking by the Chinese informants, according to Hawkins and Liszka (2003), was due to the L1 parametric features of [past], which cannot be reset by adult L2 learners.

Hawkins and Liszka's conclusion was challenged by Lardiere (2003, 2008), who argued that even if a particular parameter (or feature) such as [+past] or [+plural] existed in two languages, the feature may vary greatly in complexity and learners must figure out 'the obligatory or optional conditions and restrictions on [the] overt expression of the feature' (Lardiere 2008:5). The English past tense expresses a number of obligatory distinctions: (1) past vs nonpast; (2) irrealis mood vs non-irrealis mood; (3) verb vs non-verb; (4) regular vs irregular verbs; and (5) past vs the pragmatic-driven 'historical present' (Jacobs 1995; Pinker 2007). In other words, the past tense marking in English encodes not only formal morphosyntactic features, but also semantic and pragmatic functions – a typical case of one-to-many mapping between form and function. Therefore, it was not clear, according to Lardiere (2003), how the parameter argument could work since 'there isn't a single overt morphological reflex that encodes or divides up exactly the same bunch of stuff...in exactly the same way' (p.187).

Lardiere (2008) proposed that the variable past tense marking by Chinese-English learners was due to their imperfect 'morphological competence,' or 'the knowledge of precisely which forms go with which features' (Lardiere 2008:4). However, evidence from the emails of her informant (Patty) showed that her imperfect L2 morphological competence and knowledge seemed limited to the oral production only, since Patty inserted *-ed* in her emails at a rate of 76.92% (Lardiere 2003), in contrast to 5.80% in her speech. Similarly, Beck (1997) and Hawkins and Liszka (2003) found no significant differences in written tasks between the Chinese group and the control group. Thus the L2 'morphological competence' as conceptualized in Lardiere (2008) in terms of 'declarative knowledge' cannot fully account for the variable past tense marking in the oral production.

So the question remains: why do advanced L2 learners of Chinese background have trouble inflecting simple past tense at a near-native rate? In this study, we wish to continue the debate through two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Rigorous training is key to native-like simple past tense marking by Chinese-English speakers. We define 'rigorous training' in terms of the English language programmes offered for English-major (EM) students at the prestigious universities in China. 'Prestigious universities' are those so-called '211' and '985' universities designated by the Chinese Ministry of Education.⁷ English major

7. Of over 2,000 universities in China, 122 are '211' universities and 44 are '985' universities. Traditionally prestigious and well-known, these universities enjoy priority funding, quality staff, academic rigor, as well as development opportunities for both staff and students.

students at these universities receive rigorous and professional English language training not available to non-English major students (NEM) or students at non-prestigious universities. We hypothesize as a result of such quality training, the EM learners will inflect verbs for the past tense at a similar rate as the Japanese and German learners in Hawkins and Liszka's (2003) study.

While formal instruction has been shown to have a definite advantage in the L2 learning outcome, research typically compares tutored and non-tutored learners, types of instructions, and the length of instruction (for an overview, see Doughty 2003). Few studies examined the relationship between the learning experience and the learning outcome of end-state learners. We hypothesize that learners who have gone through top-notch language programmes in which skill training is emphasized and properly delivered do not display variable marking in the past tense.

Hypothesis 2: Rigorous training discourages 'bad choices' being made by the learner. The 'bad choice' hypothesis was proposed in Pienemann (1998) to account for the IL variational features. According to Pienemann (1998), learners use a variety of ways to deal with production and developmental problems. Omission is one of them. Omission of copula and inflectional morphemes are well documented in IL studies. While this enables the learner to meet their immediate communicative needs and even allows them to progress along the developmental path, it has a flow-on effect in the subsequent IL development. Pienemann (1998:326) pointed out that 'a learner with the most highly simplifying features also displays all other variable features.' In other words, simplified features of IL are connected and remain constant along the IL developmental course.

To test our H_2 that rigorous language training suppresses 'bad choices,' we analyzed the plural marking -s to see if indeed, there was a match between the simple past tense marking and the plural -s marking.⁸ If our H_1 were true (rigorous training is key to native-like simple past tense marking), our H_2 should also be true (rigorous training discourages 'bad choices' being made). Variable markings, or 'bad choices,' do not materialize in the IL of learners from top-notch English language programmes.

2. The study

2.1 Informants

We invited as informants 9 highly advanced end-state Chinese-English speaking professionals who had studied and graduated from prestigious education institutions

8. We thank one of the reviewers for this suggestion.

in China.⁹ These 9 academic staff (5 male and 4 female) were lecturers, senior lecturers and associate professors at an Australian university, teaching mathematics (1), physics (1), IT (1), human resources (1), law (2), education (2), and academic skills (1). They had completed their Bachelor's degrees in (mainland) China in the 1980s and 1990s. Five of them majored in English (EM), and four in non-language disciplines (NEM). Eight of them obtained their Doctorate degree in Australia, USA, and Canada, and one was in the process of completing her Ph.D. dissertation in Australia. Aged in their late 30s and early 60s, they had lived and worked outside China (US, Australia, Hong Kong, Europe, Singapore) for a minimum of 10 years. Their English proficiency, formally assessed through IELTS or TOEFL prior to their study outside China, was above TOEFL500 for the four non-English major informants, and above TOEFL600 or IELTS7.0-7.5 for the five English major informants. Additional evidence of their being advanced L2 English speakers was their current occupation – university academic staff – which requires a high level of language proficiency in addition to professional knowledge in their discipline areas.

Eight of the 9 informants studied at prestigious universities in China. Although one EM informant's university was not in that category, the English language course in her high school was of a similar standard.¹⁰

2.2 Data collection

The L2 English speech samples were elicited through interviews in English. Each interview lasted over 50 minutes. The informants were asked to recall their English language learning experience back in China, including their English classes, extra-curricular activities, motivations and feelings about the training at the university in general. They were also asked about their experience outside China, such as their Ph.D. studies, and life as students and lecturers. These conversation topics were all concerned with past events, and contained a multitude of obligatory contexts for the use of past tense verb forms including *-ed*. We also interviewed a native speaker of English as a control. The native speaker indeed treated these topics as past events, recounting her own language learning experience many years ago in the past tense.

The interview style was conversational, similar to a story-telling event. We guided the conversation and interacted with the informants but refrained from interrupting their story-telling sequence so long as the topics were concerned with past events.

9. Written informed consent was obtained from the informants.

10. This informant stated that she had acquired nearly all her English knowledge and skill in high school.

3. Data analysis and results

Hypothesis 1: Rigorous training is key to native-like simple past tense marking.

The audio recording of all 9 interviews were transcribed and cross-checked by the researchers for accuracy. Particular attention was paid to the regular verbs which required the *-ed* ending. One of the difficulties in identifying the obligatory context for the past tense marking was determining the informant's intention (what they meant to say). When the discourse context in which the informants' utterances failed to provide sufficient cues to determine the temporal reference of the utterance, the utterance was excluded from analysis. Following Lardiere's (1998a) exclusion criteria, we also did not include the following:

1. A past situation context where the situation still holds true in the present and therefore a present tense temporal reference is equally possible (e.g. *She's maybe ten years old*)
2. Formulaic expressions
3. Instances where the past and non-past forms are similar (e.g. *put*)
4. Quotations or reported speech
5. Contexts in which the past tense inflection is adjacent to homophonic stops (e.g. *We exchanged diary. I stopped talking.*)
6. Utterances followed immediately by spontaneous self-correction

We calculated the suppliance rate of the past tense *-ed* in the obligatory contexts of four verb categories:

1. All verbs
2. Thematic verbs or lexical main verbs: *drive, talk, eat, study*
3. Regular verbs: *talk, study*
4. Irregular verbs: *drive-drove, eat-ate*

Table 1 shows individual informants' past tense marking in obligatory contexts. Except for the regular verb category in EM04, the overall data density is high. Figure 1 shows the overall results. The past *-ed* suppliance, although the lowest among the four verb categories, nevertheless reached 61%, a comparable rate to that of Hawkins and Liszka's (2003) Chinese informants (62.5%). Irregular verbs, on the other hand, had the highest marking rate (73%). Both were much higher than Patty's (5.8% on regular verbs, 40% on irregular verbs). When the regular past *-ed* suppliance of the EM and NEM informants was analysed separately (Figure 2), we saw that the EM group outperformed the NEM group by a large margin (71% and 47% respectively). Figure 3 shows that our EM informants also

Table 1. Past tense marking

Informants	Verb type	Number of obligatory context	Past tense suppliance	Suppliance rate(%)
EM01	Irregular	73	66	90.41
	Regular	46	34	73.91
	Thematic	119	100	84.03
	All Verb	228	181	79.39
EM02	Irregular	61	55	90.12
	Regular	49	36	73.47
	Thematic	110	91	82.72
	All Verb	179	142	79.33
EM03	Irregular	32	29	90.63
	Regular	22	13	59.09
	Thematic	54	42	77.78
	Verb	129	85	65.89
EM04	Irregular	37	29	78.38
	Regular	5	4	80
	Thematic	42	33	78.57
	All Verb	135	121	89.63
EM05	Irregular	63	41	65.08
	Regular	34	24	70.95
	Thematic	97	65	67.01
	All Verb	202	129	63.86
NEM06	Irregular	74	68	91.89
	Regular	50	36	72
	Thematic	124	104	83.87
	All Verb	231	183	79.22
NEM07	Irregular	50	34	68.00
	Regular	14	10	71.42
	Thematic	64	44	68.75
	All Verb	155	110	70.97
NEM08	Irregular	110	49	44.54
	Regular	51	10	19.60
	Thematic	161	59	36.64
	All Verb	314	92	29.20
NEM09	Irregular	107	45	42.06
	Regular	57	15	26.32
	Thematic	164	60	36.59
	All Verb	364	111	30.49

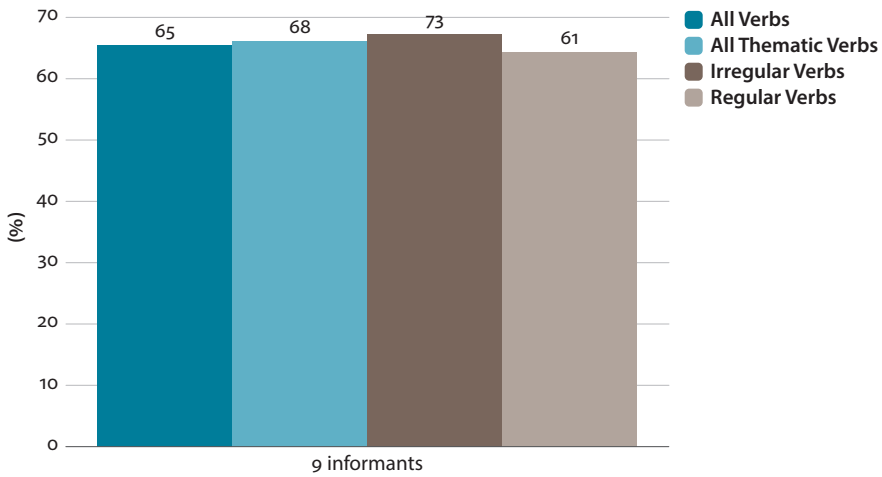


Figure 1. Overall past tense marking (%)

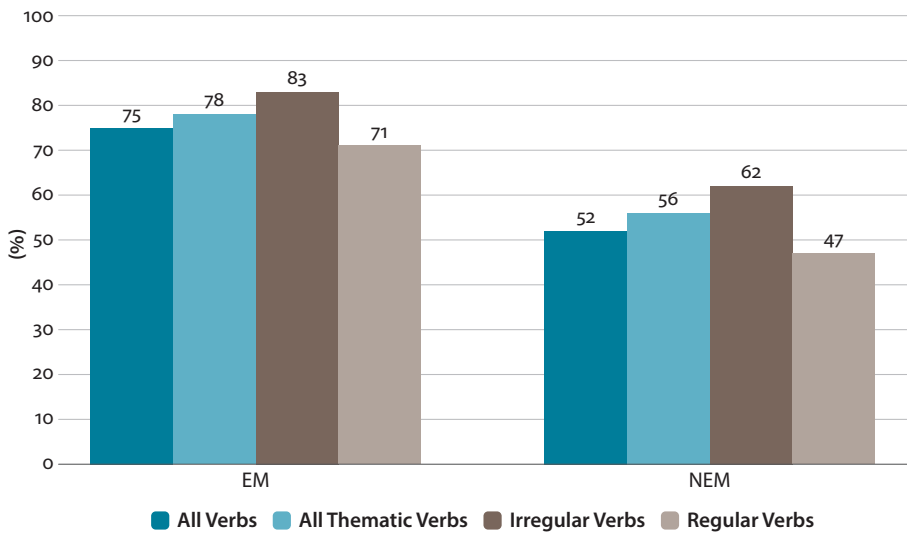


Figure 2. Past tense marking by EM and SM (%)

outperformed Hawkins and Liszka's Chinese informants (71% vs. 63%), but not their German and Japanese informants (96% and 92%).

The NEM group displays large individual variations. Figure 4 shows that two of the NEM informants (06, 07) performed at the level of the EM informants, with above 70% past *-ed* suppliance rates (72%, 71%). The other two NEM

informants (08, 09) had low past marking rates (20%, 26%) although still much higher than Patty.

In sum, as a group, the results corroborate Hawkins and Liszka's (2003) findings, and the suppliance rates of *-ed* in both studies are higher than Patty (Lardiere 1998a/b). Our EM informants marked the regular past tense more consistently and at a higher rate than both our NEM informants and Hawkins and Liszka's Chinese informants although they did not reach the level of the German and Japanese informants.

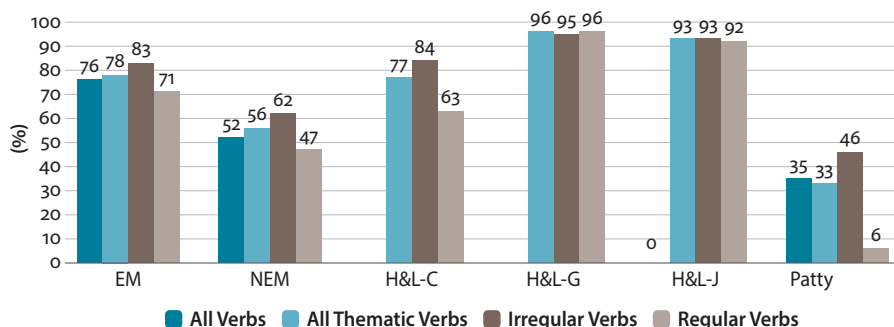


Figure 3. Past tense marking by EM, SM, Chinese (H&L-C), German (H&L-G), Japanese (H&L-J), and Patty (%)

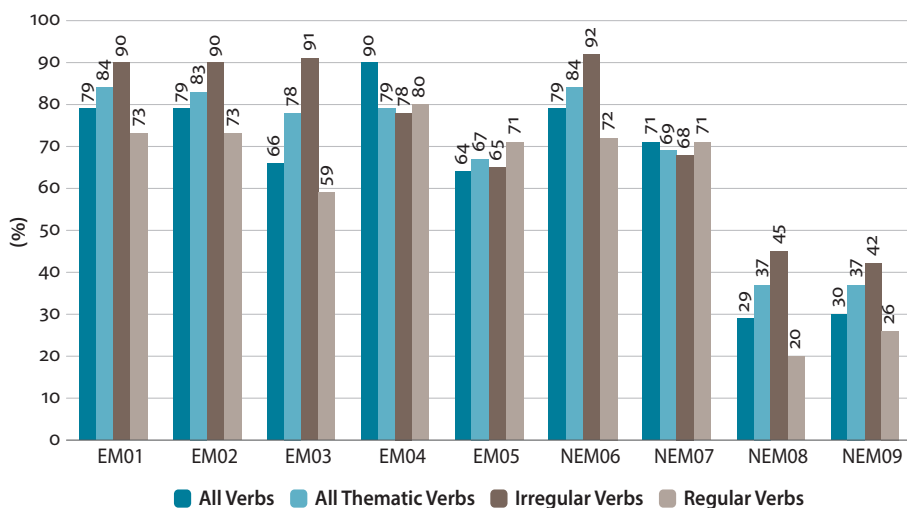


Figure 4. Individual results of past tense marking (%)

Hypothesis 2: Rigorous training discourages 'bad choices' being made.

To test H_2 , we analyzed the plural marking in the data to see if there was any connection between the past marking and the plural marking. This is because according to Processability Theory, the 'bad choices' made in the IL are not isolated

instances. We identified two types of plural contexts: the lexical plural (*I like oranges*) and the phrasal plural (*these/two oranges*) which requires agreement. According to the processing hierarchy for L2 English (Pienemann 2005: 24), the lexical plural is situated at the same developmental stage as the simple past *-ed* while the phrasal plural is one stage higher. If H_2 were true, we should see a correlative trend between the past tense marking and the plural marking at both group and individual levels. Furthermore, the EM group should display a homogeneous characteristic.

The obligatory plural contexts and the plural marking in these contexts were noted in the transcripts. Four of the 9 transcripts were double-checked by a native speaker of English for analytical accuracy. Table 2 shows the obligatory plural contexts, the suppliance of *-s*, and the suppliance rates. Figure 5 displays the marking rates by the EM and the NEM groups. Clearly, the EM supplied both plural markers at a higher rate than the NEM, and both groups performed better than their past tense marking, as shown in Figure 6. Similar to the past tense marking, NEM06 and NEM07 reached the level of the EM group, while NEM08 once more brought up the rear. As a group, the EM had a high level of homogeneity, as evidenced in a smaller range (87%–98% for the lexical *-s* and 87–96% for the phrasal *-s*).

Table 2. Plural marking

Informants	Plural types	Number of obligatory contexts	Number of plural suppliances	Suppliance rate (%)
EM01	Lexical	46	42	91
	Phrasal	47	41	87
EM02	Lexical	95	93	98
	Phrasal	61	58	95
EM03	Lexical	69	60	87
	Phrasal	42	38	90
EM04	Lexical	60	54	90
	Phrasal	25	24	96
EM05	Lexical	39	34	87
	Phrasal	32	28	88
NEM06	Lexical	98	94	96
	Phrasal	57	55	96
NEM07	Lexical	35	30	86
	Phrasal	22	21	95
NEM08	Lexical	42	26	62
	Phrasal	42	25	60
NEM09	Lexical	64	55	86
	Phrasal	49	43	88

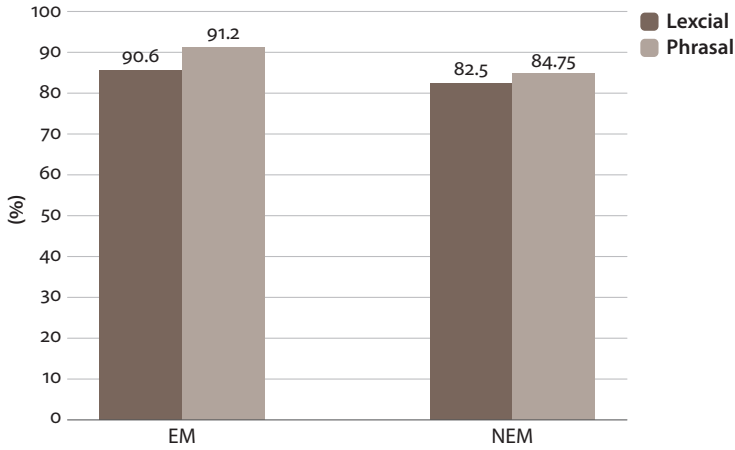


Figure 5. Plural marking by EM and NEM (%)

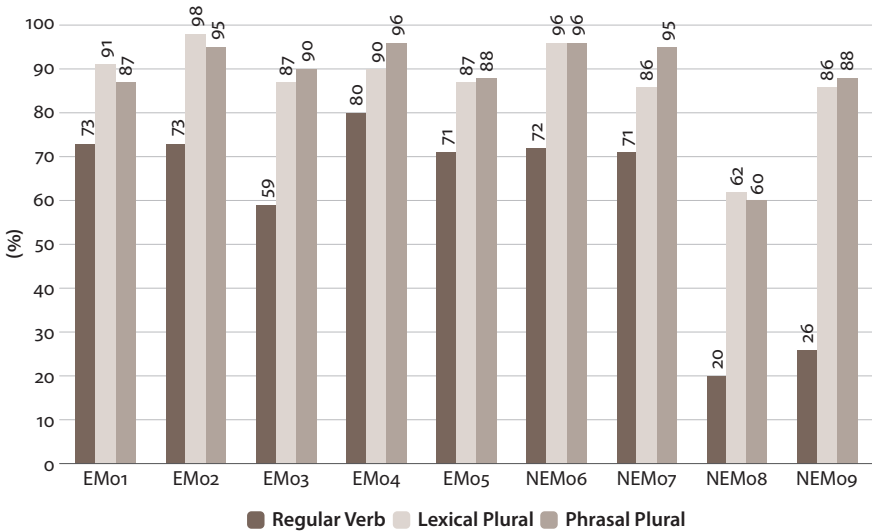


Figure 6. Individual results of past (-ed) and plural marking (%)

Indeed, the high level of the past tense marking was matched by a comparable high level of the plural marking in 7 informants. One NEM informant (08) was low in both. This suggests a connection between the features of IL, supporting the generative entrenchment claim in L2 learning as well as H_2 . The one exception seemed to be NEM09, whose low past marking (26%) was not duly reflected in his high plural marking (lexical 86%, phrasal 88%). In the following, we will discuss our findings in connection to the hypotheses, and the case of the two NEM high achievers.

4. Discussion

The consistent performance at a high level both as a group and at the individual level by the EM group supports H_1 : Rigorous training is key to native-like simple past tense marking by Chinese-English speakers. It is testimony to the value of a well-organized, all-round and rigorous training program. In the 1980s and early 1990s when our informants were university students in China, the English language teaching in China was characterized by the 'focus-on-formS' approach (Long & Robinson 1998),¹¹ with the emphasis on L2 grammatical and lexical knowledge. L2 accuracy overrode L2 fluency and communicative skills. In the universities, the quality of language programs, language teachers and classroom instruction varied greatly between EM and NEM programmes, and this was reflected in the quality of the curriculum and the competence of the teachers in terms of their L2 knowledge and skill to organize and deliver instructions. The mission of the English department of the prestigious universities was to produce language professionals for foreign affairs, translation and interpretation, international business, journalism, and tertiary institutions. The target proficiency level for the EM students at the end of their four-year study was native-like L2 linguistic and communicative competence. To this end, the EM curriculum contained a variety of courses with clearly articulated goals, and was delivered systematically to students throughout their degree programme. In addition to core language courses (listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation), EM students also took courses in English and American literature, western culture and society, international politics, and world history. These were usually taught in English, often by native English-speaking 'foreign experts' (*waijiao* 外教). The Chinese teaching staff in the English department were themselves highly proficient and often (near) native-like in English. Many of them had received education in missionary schools or spent time in the English speaking countries.

Classes for the EM were small, with 15 to 20 students per class. Classroom teaching was characterized by both focus-on-form and focus-on-formS (Long 1991; Long & Robinson 1998). Accuracy and fluency were emphasized and demanded equally. L2 input and practice took place both inside and outside the classroom, and students had access to English language resources such as native speakers, English language films, books, magazines, and international radio broadcasts. They also had more opportunities for the extensive application of their L2 knowledge and skill during their studies.

11. According to Long and Robinson (1998, also Doughty & Williams 1998), *Focus on formS* refers to the kind of instruction that focuses on the formal elements of language.

In contrast, NEM students were required to take ‘General English’ courses (*gonggong waiyu* 公共外语) only in the first two years of their four-year university study. Although compulsory, the language courses were peripheral to their discipline courses. The classroom instruction focused on L2 knowledge exclusively with an explicit emphasis on L2 grammar and vocabulary. General English classes were large. It was not uncommon to have a class of 50 to 200 students from various disciplines under one roof. The teaching staff was not required to have a high L2 proficiency as they were not required to teach in L2 English. Students rarely had the chance to see native speaker teachers, let alone being taught by them. Overall, general English courses in the academic life of the NEM students were not accorded the same status as those for the EM students. Table 3 is a summary of the key features of the language programs for EM and NEM students.

It seems clear from the sketch above, reported by the informants, that the differential training regime during the formative years of our informants’ academic study was reflected in the end-state of their L2 English, in particular, in the past tense marking.

Table 3. Programmes for English major and non-English major in Chinese universities (prior to 1999)

English Programme	English major (EM)	Non-English major (NEM)
Length (years)	4	2
Target proficiency level	Native-like	Not explicitly specified
Focus	Comprehensive L2 knowledge and functional skills	Grammar and vocabulary
Class size	12–20 students	30–200+ students
Instruction	15–25 hr/week	4–5 hr/week
Language of instruction	L2 (English)	L1 (Chinese)
Instruction format	Lecture (teacher-front), tutorial, pair/group work	Lecture (teacher-front)
Staff	Chinese, English native speakers	Chinese
Curriculum	Variety of courses in and about L2	General English

How do we account for the consistent high level of tense and plural marking by two of the NEM informants (e.g., NEM06, NEM07)? According to the stories of our NEM informants, what had not been provided by the English language programme and classroom instruction was compensated for by a rigorous regime of self-training driven by an extraordinarily high level of motivation. All four NEM informants reported similar classroom experience in their undergraduate studies: teacher-centered pedagogy, exclusive focus on grammar and vocabulary,

grammar-translation teaching methods, large classes, and instruction in L1. They also reported similar experiences outside the classroom: actively seeking out opportunities to receive input by and interact with native-speakers of English, participating in extra-curriculum activities to practice and use English, and implementing an intensive and continuous self-training regime. Strongly goal-oriented and highly motivated, they made a huge effort working towards the level of English proficiency required to study abroad. All four of them also reported a drastic change in their postgraduate studies in China: more focus on speaking and listening skills, more time spent on self-study, and seeking every opportunity to use English, for example, attending seminars given by international scholars, watching English-speaking films, practicing English in the 'English corner'¹² on weekends, listening to VOA or BBC. Hard work paid off, but the extent and quality of the outcome varied, indicating that without a quality programme that formally organizes and delivers rigorous and consistent training professionally, the learning outcome varies greatly. The possibility of 'bad choices,' i.e., forming hypotheses that allow the acquisition of a simplified form to meet immediate communication needs, increases.

Indeed, if we examine the suppliance of the plural marking in the data, we see that those informants who did not opt for the omission option for the simple past tense marking also did not do so for the plural marking (see Figure 4 and Figure 6: the EM group, NEM06 and NEM07). The 'bad choice' was not entertained by these informants. NEM08 was low in both, indicating a 'bad choice' scenario. The only exception was NEM09, whose past tense marking was low but whose plural marking was not. Overall, the developmental profiles of the informants in the two inflectional morphemes under study seem in line with the 'bad choice hypothesis' or 'developmental dynamics' discussed in Pienemann (1998: 326–327), 'learners who do not progress far along the developmental axis after a long period of exposure have developed a highly simplifying variety of the L2.' Previous studies such as Clahsen, Meisel and Pienemann (1983, cited in Pienemann 1998) on L2 German and Lardiere (1998a/b) on L2 English support the view. In the L2 German study, it was found that despite more than 7 years of exposure, a group of learners exhibited highly simplified features in their L2 German below Stage X+2 (verb separation). Similarly, Patty in Lardiere (1998a/b) supplied a mere 4.5% 3rd person -s and 34.5% past tense marking despite her 10+ years of living and working in the US. On the other hand, similar to our informants who did not make 'bad choices,' SD, an adult Turkish-speaking learner of

12. English corner: a spontaneous gathering to practice English in parks. Anyone and everyone can participate. It started in the late 1970s and still exists in some cities today.

L2 English, consistently supplied a high level of 3rd per -s (Time1: 78%, Time2: 81.5%) and the past tense¹³ (Time1: 85%, Time2: 76%) after living in Canada for 10 years (White, 2003).

The findings from previous research as well as our study indicate that the variable marking by L2 English learners of Chinese background is mainly confined to the simple past tense *-ed* in the oral form. From the processing perspective, the past *-ed* and the lexical plural *-s* are both lexical morphemes, and therefore require the same processing procedures (Pienemann 1998). Indeed, they had been successfully acquired by all the informants, as measured by the 'emergence criterion' (Pienemann 1998). However, in terms of the ultimate attainment as measured by the accuracy criterion, the Chinese informants in all the studies fell short. Since online processing skills (Pienemann 1998) and L2 morphological competence (Lardiere 2008) apply to all L2 learners regardless of L1 parametric settings, German and Japanese learners face the same processing issue as Chinese learners when learning L2 English. Yet, the German and Japanese learners in Hawkins and Liszka (2003) were able to supply the past tense *-ed* more consistently at near-native rates, and Chinese informants were not. It seems the one factor that sets the Chinese apart from German and Japanese is the presence of the past tense in German and Japanese. This appears to give an advantage to adult L2 English learners of German and Japanese backgrounds. It seems that the past tense morphology, if exercised in the L1 through first language acquisition, remains and assists with L2 past tense learning. This may offer an additional explanation for the near-native performance of the German and Japanese but not the Chinese informants.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the variable past tense marking in the L2 English of Chinese learners. Although (formal) tutoring has long been proved to be superior in second language acquisition than non-tutoring, the level of ultimate attainment that a well-organized and professionally executed language programme can achieve has not been documented for this group of learners. Our own study supports the argument that a rigorous training regime indeed enables a uniformly high level of skill development and discourages 'bad choices' being made.

By way of conclusion, we would like to offer some suggestions for foreign language teaching. First, Chinese language teachers (and learners) should be made

13. It seems there was no separation between regular and irregular verbs.

aware of the past marking issue.¹⁴ A lack of awareness, compounded with a mediocre training programme, tends to result in a high level of variable past marking in the end-state. Pedagogical intervention should take place early, covering a range of (past) tense situations and focusing on regular verbs through 'Processing Instruction' (VanPatten 2007), focus-on-form and focus-on-forms approaches (Long & Robinson, 1998).

Given the learning experience of our informants, we would like to propose a shorter but intensive training programme for NEM students similar to that enjoyed by our EM informants, because it may achieve what a two-year General English course is unable to do. Without it, the NEM students must invest time and effort to train themselves in order to attain a high level of L2 skill, and this may not be achievable for everyone.

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14. Many (Chinese) teachers and students, including ourselves, were unaware of this before this study.

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